



# Russian Poetry in the Marketplace: 1800-1917, and Beyond

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*Russian Poetry in the Marketplace: 1800-1917, and Beyond*

A dissertation presented

by

Aleksey Berg

to

The Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures

in partial fulfillment of the requirement

for the degree of

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Russian Poetry in the Marketplace: 1800-1917, and Beyond

Abstract

My dissertation explores ways in which poetic utterances actually do speak against the received idea of poetry as an atemporal and unearthly genre and subtly present their own social and economic agendas. I read the canonical and non-canonical texts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian poetry with an eye for uncovering the economic and social dynamics of these texts, unveiling their intricate and complicated relations to issues of censorship, copyright, professionalization of literature and the literary market, fashion, marital conventions and practices, the transition from gentry-oriented literature to a bourgeois reading public, formation of national identity, imperial conquests, etc. I argue that poetry in the nineteenth century often did engage the relevant issues of the day, just as the novel did, but it was (and is) the dominant mode of reading that prevents us from recognizing the political and economic inventory of verse. I focus on situations of implicit dialogue, where poetic texts respond to or engage the themes and ideas upheld by the novelistic tradition and often promote a very different, or at least an unfamiliar, disposition of forces in society. My dissertation argues for a new practical mode of reading poetry, a mode of reading which goes against the grain of both the existing scholarship on poetry and also the self-imposed vow of being “somewhat stupid,” of refusing or being unable to converse about and investigate social, economic, and political realia.

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## Introduction

### Goals and Ideas

The tension between poetry and society dates back to what some might consider the beginning of both. Plato banishes, in his imagination, poets from the ideal political state, considering them untrustworthy, unreliable, and dangerous to the youth.<sup>1</sup> This imaginary expulsion manifests a deep mistrust of poetry and poets, whose frivolous presence threatens to disrupt the idyll of the utopian state. Importantly, this expulsion also implicitly acknowledges that however absentminded and unpolitical poets might seem, true philosophers would not fail to see how poetry is implicated in the affairs of state and society. However much volatile pleasure we take in reciting, rereading, and writing poetry (and Plato's extensive quotations from the classics suggest he was not exactly insensitive to the charms of Calliope, Euterpe, and Erato), poetry is as much a part of the political and social discourse as are taxes, foreign relations, or health care.

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<sup>1</sup> "Those, I said, which are narrated by Homer and Hesiod, and the rest of the poets, who have ever been the great story-tellers of mankind.

But which stories do you mean, he said; and what fault do you find with them?

A fault which is most serious, I said; the fault of telling a lie, and, what is more, a bad lie.

But when is this fault committed?

Whenever an erroneous representation is made of the nature of gods and heroes—as when a painter paints a portrait not having the shadow of a likeness to the original." Plato, *The Republic, Book II*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.mb.txt>.

Some argue that poetry is a social matter inasmuch as it deals with language, which is a social matter. While that might be true, poetry is very different from our usual communicative practices. For Roman Jakobson, the “poetic” function of language (language bent onto itself) is the trademark of imaginative literature, and the presence of poetic language differentiates between language that communicates and language that reflects upon itself. As such, the “poetic function of language”<sup>2</sup> (which for Jakobson is not unique to poetry) is programmatically different from language as we use it in everyday life. Although poetry and poets might seem to be speaking in the same language as Estonians, Russians, Americans, or the Chinese, their speech problematizes or even undermines the very essence of communication.

A driver who started using a car’s turn signals playfully to amuse himself or fellow drivers would be considered insane and perhaps would be fined by the police. But poets have our sanction to use language in whatever way they find necessary. Their antics do not cause any immediate danger. Of course, one would probably not consider a child playing with the turn signals of his parents’ car a driver. But if this analogy held, a poet should be no more be considered a responsible and mature user of language than a child playing with car’s turn signals should be considered a driver. Mere reliance on language is not a sufficient reason to treat poetry as a social subject.

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<sup>2</sup> Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style in Language*, ed. Th. Sebeok, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960, 350-377.

Indeed it has become commonplace in recent times to view poetry as a pre-rational, emotional, natural, elemental, sensuous, intuitive type of discourse<sup>3</sup>. No matter which of these adjectives one might find particularly dear, the implicit oppositions of poetry and reason, poetry and rationality, and poetry and analytic discourse have become dominant in modernity. To give a very telling example of such attitude, I will allow myself a small digression and dwell a little on Walter Scott's 1817 novel *Rob Roy*, which, as I hope I will be able to show, encapsulates the very essence of these kinds of anxieties over poetry and the status of poetic utterance today.

The main protagonist of the novel, Frank Osbaldistone, is a poet whose Romantic inclinations clash with his father's ambition to make Frank his heir and successor in the family trade. The very resolute and hard-headed father sends his sentimental son away to a remote estate in Scotland to live with 'his brother and Frank's uncle, Sir Hildebrand, and his large family. In Frank's stead, the main villain of the novel, Frank's cousin Rashleigh, travels to London and takes Frank's place in Frank's father's firm. While living on the estate, Frank falls in love with Diana, Sir Hildebrand's niece, who, like many of Scott's female characters, acknowledges Frank as her Romantic peer but is hesitant to succumb to passion due to her allegiance to the affairs of Scotland. Meanwhile, partly from 'dismay at Diana's feelings toward Frank and partly from the evil nature of 'his character, Rashleigh decides to ruin Frank's father and his business. He steals important documents, putting Frank's father on the verge of bankruptcy. In an interesting collision of values, the gentleman's honor is equated with the merchant's solvency. The novel's hidden irony is revealed when unexpected salvation from the imminent financial ruin comes

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<sup>3</sup> See a very good discussion of this perceived "naturalness" of poetry in B. Perelman, "Poetry in Theory," *Diacritics*, no. 3-4, vol. 24, 1996, 158-175.



from Frank. His friendship with Diana leads him to Rob Roy MacGregor, a mysterious Highlander who takes a liking to the young poet and helps him recover his family's honor and fortune—in the mountains of Scotland. It is Frank's capacity to negotiate between his loyalty to his country's imperial aspirations and his infatuation with the world of exotic Highlanders which allows him to dispose Highlanders in his favor and not only completely restore the status quo but actually multiply his fortune, inherit the estate, and marry Diana.<sup>4</sup> Going all in and simplifying my argument by means of an illicit subjunctive mood: had Frank not been a poet, his father's business would not have been in jeopardy and would likely have continued to grow steadily. However, had he not been a poet, he would not have been able to recruit Diana as his soul mate and helper, befriend the Highlanders, and thus not only restore his father's fortune but actually dramatically increase it.

My dissertation is going to capitalize on Walter Scott's suspicion that poetry might after all be strongly implicated in matters of economy and society. Indeed, Scott was writing at a time when prose writing and, in particular, the novel was gradually being recognized as professional in two senses: it was written by professionals (professional writers) for professionals (the

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<sup>4</sup> Thus in effect—to digress from a digression—in all likelihood becoming some kind of precursor to Pushkin's Petya Grinev from *Captain's Daughter*. Indeed, Pushkin's novella seems to recycling much of Scott's novel: a Romantic hero who has to choose between ancestral loyalty to the empire and the lure of the exotic; the rebel and outlaw who helps the protagonist in spite of his own strife against the empire, acknowledging him as his equal (Pugachev, Rob Roy); the anti-hero, who very much like the protagonist is involved in negotiating between the empire and the guerillas, but fails at that and is punished by both (Rashleigh, Shvabrin); the main conflict of the narrative itself, which is centered around first jeopardizing the protagonist's honor and then restoring it—all in all, Pushkin clearly was an avid reader of Scott's novels. More on Pushkin's reliance on Walter Scott's narrative ideas in *Captain's Daughter* can be found in D. P. Iakubovich, "Kapitanskaia dochka i romany Valtera Skotta," *Pushkin. Vremennik Pushkinskoi komissii*. Moscow, vol. 4-5, Leningrad, 1939, 165-197. Also, M. Greene, "Pushkin and Sir Walter Scott," *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1965, 207-215. Also, N. N. Petrunina, *Proza Pushkina. Puti evolutsii*, Leningrad, 1987, 241-248. Also, A. A. Dolinin, *Istoria, odetiia v roman. Valter Scott i ego chitateli*, Moscow, 1988, 231-234. Also, M. Frazier, "Kapitanskaia dochka and the Creativity of Borrowing," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 1993, vol. 37, no. 4, 472-489.

bourgeois reading public). In a world of big novels, poetry was relegated to the status of hobby and part-time occupation. Novels had a lot to say about issues of the day: politics, law, customs, social advancement and social stratification, medicine, religion, trade, foreign relations, family life, child rearing, horse racing (*Anna Karenina*, 1873-77), military tactics (*The Red and the Black*, 1830), dueling (any Russian novel, such as Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, 1862), the state of medical care in the provinces (*Madame Bovary*, 1856), the criminal world (*Oliver Twist*, 1838)—virtually all areas of human experience had been reflected and represented in the novel.

The very rise of the novel in the eighteenth century has often been understood as a pivotal point in the advancement of bourgeois culture<sup>5</sup>. The novelistic tradition is firmly associated today with the dissemination of such concepts as nationhood, the public sphere, empire, etc. It has become commonplace to treat novels as narratives of social change, public discourses where experiments of all sorts were conducted and where inquiries were made into socially relevant issues: Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and European colonialism, Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1787) and social inequality, Dickens and urban poverty, Dostoevsky and the impact of burgeoning capitalism on a still predominantly non-urban society, Zola and the social experiment. The history of the novel as we know it now is tightly linked with the history of capitalism on many levels: it defined the reading public and reading novels as a bourgeois

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<sup>5</sup> See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957.

leisure-time occupation (Ian Watt), it outlined the imaginary boundaries of a nation<sup>6</sup>, and it was an important subject of discussion in the bourgeois public sphere<sup>7</sup>.

Poetry seems to have left none of this legacy. It has been relegated to the emotional world, especially as epic poetry became less and less popular with the spread of the capitalist economy (perhaps because the novel took on what had previously been the domain of the epic). It engages private feelings of bourgeois individuals but rarely, if ever, talks about matters of communal concern. Pushkin's phrase, "Поэзия должна быть глуповата"<sup>8</sup> ("Poetry needs to be somewhat stupid") manifests this very modern mistrust of poetry when it comes to serious matters. Pushkin does not accuse poetry of being stupid but rather prescribes it to be so. His phrase does not register the state of affairs but instead sets the mode of poetic action. It is not that poetry is stupid but that it has to be so, has to become so, has to learn how to be so.

I am very interested in this recurrent and now familiar skepticism about and suspicion of poetry. I would like to explore how it came to be that some representational discourses (such as the novel) have been invested with our confidence that they can represent various relevant areas of experience, while others have been almost programmatically restricted to much narrower limits. Obviously, this situation cannot be "natural" or resulting from the novel's superior ability of representation. One needs only to think of ancient classical literature and the very marginal,

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, New York: Verso, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991.

<sup>8</sup> A. Pushkin in a letter to P. A. Viazemsky, May, 1826. See A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, eds. V. D. Bonch-Bruевич et al., vol. 13, Moscow: Voskresenie, 1996, 278.

decorative, recreational role that prose narratives played in it—as opposed to the supreme reign of verse narratives, which were authorized to discuss politics, history, arts, philosophy, religion, and even science (like Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*)<sup>9</sup>.

Clearly, then, the contemporary (or, better said, modern) literary situation, which looks like a complete reversal of the classical one, should not be taken for granted and instead should be studied as a particular historical configuration of the literary field. This situation should be researched and analyzed in the context of other adjacent discourses (politics, economics, law, science), with an explicit question of how the current balance of powers in the literary field came to be. Why is it that even in the Middle Ages, the canon was still composed primarily of poetic works, but in the nineteenth century prose completely takes over and becomes the dominant mode of literary production? Could it be because verse’s reliance on formal, prosodic elements of the discourse (rhyme, meter, alliteration) is gradually being recognized as redundant and cumbersome—perhaps due to advances in printing culture and the proliferation of printed literature? Is it that the requirement to rhyme or to observe the meter compromises any claims to a rational, intellectual, truth-producing discourse? If prosodic exigency dictates word choice, phrase structure, or word order, then one might have valid doubts about intellectual efficacy and rigor of such mode of representation. This reliance on prosody was not, however, regarded as superfluous or unreasonable in other times and places—so it cannot be just that.

Or is it poetry’s attachment to its native tongue that seems to us to curb its representative potency? In an age when translation has become widespread (so that most popular works are

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<sup>9</sup> H. A. J. Munro, ed. & trans, *Lucretius, On the Nature of Things (De Rerum Nature)*, London: Routledge, 1886.

translated just a few years after publication in the original language), the notorious (or perhaps intentionally exaggerated) difficulty of translating poetry may be preventing it from competing with prose as a medium of representation. If certain truths can only exist and be understood in just one language, then not only are their claims to universality undermined, but also their persuasive potential is wasted on the majority of the reading public. It might be encouraging to know that a certain Russian or Chinese poet has achieved great prominence among his compatriots for the mystifying seductiveness of his poetic output, but it is rather disheartening at the same time to realize that we will never be seduced by it.

Or could be the implicit idea that works of greater length require more effort, more thought, and more consideration and thus are inherently more reliable? Clearly, a thousand-page novel fits the capitalist idea of work much better than a facetious quatrain, which might have taken mere minutes to compose. Indeed, poetry would then probably belong to the so-called “leisure culture”<sup>10</sup> and as such be unable to vie with more serious prose genres for a more prominent position in the literary hierarchy.

Or, perhaps, it might be poetry’s dependence on history and tradition (especially recently), which excludes an average reader from participating? Novels have traditionally been written for a larger audience and often contain within themselves everything needed to digest and comprehend them. They frequently are self-referential, but they do not refer to other works of literature as often as poems habitually do. Certainly, then, novels become more suitable vessels for understanding, propagating, negotiating, and exploring relevant social, economic, and

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<sup>10</sup> As defined in T. Veblen, *The Theory of Leisure Class*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973, 17.

political issues, and thus they occupy a significantly more visible, privileged, and advantaged position in the hierarchy of literary genres.

Still, the question of prose's supremacy over poetry in modernity is somewhat ancillary to my main goal. My main interest lies in exploring ways in which poetic utterances actually do speak against the received idea of poetry as an atemporal and unearthly genre and subtly present their own social and economic agendas. I will read the canonical and non-canonical texts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian poetry with an eye for uncovering the economic and social dynamics of these texts, unveiling their intricate and complicated relations to issues of censorship, copyright, professionalization of literature and the literary market, fashion, marital conventions and practices, the transition from gentry-oriented literature to a bourgeois reading public, formation of national identity, imperial conquests, etc. I will argue that poetry in the nineteenth century often did engage the relevant issues of the day, just as the novel did, but it was (and is) the dominant mode of reading, which prevents us from recognizing the political and economic inventory of verse. I am particularly interested in the situations of implicit dialogue, where poetic texts respond to or engage the themes and ideas upheld by the novelistic tradition and often promote a very different, or at least an unfamiliar, disposition of forces in society. All in all, my dissertation will argue for a new practical mode of reading poetry, a mode of reading which goes against the grain of both the existing scholarship on poetry and also the self-imposed vow of being "somewhat stupid," of refusing or being unable to converse about and investigate social, economic, and political realia.

I will now give a brief summary of the chapters of my dissertation. In the first chapter, I will proceed from a discussion of Pushkin's late elegy "Когда за городом, задумчив, я брожу"

(“When, pensive, I roam beyond the city”) in order to describe a larger picture of Russian elegiac response to emergent capitalism and the nascent literary market. I will read Pushkin’s poem as a response to Zhukovsky’s translation of Gray’s “Elegy Written in the Country Churchyard” and analyze ways in which Pushkin’s poem interprets, digests, and transforms the liberatory aspirations of the original poem and its translation. I will show how it offers a social interpretation of the elegy and ties the elegiac mode of representation with the environment of the estates, where the identity of land-owning aristocracy is still intact and not jeopardized by the advent of market relations. I will also read Boratynsky’s late poems (in particular, his poem “Рифма” [Rhyme]), and explore ways in which he adapts classical elegiac tropes to represent the growing anxiety over the poet’s role and status in a world where the relationship with the reader is mediated by the market. This kind of anxiety, I will argue, becomes integral to the poetic identity Boratynsky is constructing.

In my second chapter, I will deal with Nikolai Nekrasov and Igor Severianin. I regard their poetic practices as an attempt to resist the increasing marginalization of poetry on the literary market. Instead, both poets strove to compete with prose, and therefore sought ways to adapt and modify their poetics to make it more competitive.

In the third chapter, I focus on the poetry of the Silver Age, exploring the impact of advanced capitalism on the radical poetic practices of Russian modernist poets. I begin with a quick survey of the Russian literary market in the early twentieth century, and then explore how modernist poetry reacted to the apparent defeat of the poetic utterance on that market. I uncover tactics employed by modernist poets to resist the label of outsiders imposed upon them by the fully-fledged literary market of early-twentieth-century Russia. Among others, I pay particularly

close attention to Osip Mandel'shtam in whose poetry I find reflections on the social circumstances of writing poetry under advanced capitalism.

Lastly, I look into the underground poetry of the Soviet period. I maintain that poetic output of the “unofficial” literary underground literature (here the gap between prose and poetry is finally bridged as they share a common path in the underground) was highly idiosyncratic due to the unusual circumstances of its production. Just as the official Soviet ideology and the Soviet regime in general declaratively superseded capitalism, ousting market ideology and market relations from actual practice, so did those who claimed to oppose the regime and sought alternative paths to recognition. In fact, in its resistance to market relations and market ideology in literature, and in the kind of contingent, transient concept of literary value that it necessarily brings about, the so-called underground culture far outstripped even the most zealous adepts of Socialist realism. It may be fairly common for producers of cultural goods to claim a certain degree of independence from the field of cultural production and instead appeal to timeless, immutable systems of reference. But I argue that that nowhere else in the history of literature has there been such a high claimed and sought degree of (obviously, imaginary) independence from the field of cultural production as in the culture of the underground. The incessantly inculcated, reinforced orientation to “writing for eternity” unites essentially all branches, movements, and groups that existed in the unofficial literature. Thus, in their disregard of the literary market they outdid even those who, like Gorky and the Union of Soviet Writers, pledged to expel market relations from literature.



## Methodology

Lyric poetry has rarely been the subject of intense social analysis. Instead, genre and psychoanalytic approaches have dominated, especially in Western scholarship. In the Russian context, among the more influential perspectives on poetry is Lidia Ginzburg's monograph *O lirike*<sup>11</sup>, where elegiac production is defined through genre and style—epithets, prosodic characteristics, themes, images, and so on. Interestingly, Ginzburg maintains that Russian elegy from its very beginnings tended toward repeating and replaying its own structures and devices. According to Ginzburg, elegiac culture at the height of its dominance (in the 1810s) seemed almost to be copying medieval patterns of cultural production, bent on reproduction rather than innovation. Her famous definition of the Russian elegiac school as a “school of harmonic precision”<sup>12</sup>—a seductive formulation, but also strangely unsatisfying and evasive, almost “elegiac” in itself—emphasizes not Aristotelian precision of correspondence with “reality” but precision in following the exact patterns of cultural production. Such insistence on repetition and adherence to tradition prompts one to regard elegiac discourse as essentially conservative, aiming to preserve established social dynamics rather than challenging them. Ginzburg's analytical apparatus is of course anything but Marxist, but if we accept the Marxist theory of literature, in which the economic conditions of production are encoded in all literary texts, that scheme should apply just as well to subjects that resist social interpretation as to those that welcome it. While I will not argue that elegy is inherently a politically conservative genre, this

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<sup>11</sup> Lidia Ginzburg, *O lirike*, Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel, 1974.

tension between aesthetic choices and political consequences will remain at the center of my discussion of elegy.

Another approach to poetry, which has gained prominence in the recent scholarship, is to read verse narratives as evidence of the unconscious—that is to say, to read them psychoanalytically. A good example of this approach is Peter Sacks’s *English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*.<sup>12</sup> This monograph uses Freud’s essay “Mourning and Melancholia” for a very convincing explanatory framework. According to Freud, narcissistic identification with loss disrupts the harmony of the ego and drives the mourner into a state of melancholy; elegiac poetry then becomes the means for the performative ritual of recuperation and Oedipal renunciation of desire (“normative mourning,” which has lain at the foundation of the elegiac discourse since Orpheus). Sacks goes on to show how specific procedures of coping with loss (for example, the Fort—Da game) are mirrored in the rhetorical structures of elegiac narrative. While such interpretation does seem very compelling, one might also wonder whether it somehow essentializes Freudian psychoanalysis, taking it as an infallible doctrine rather than as itself perhaps a product of capitalist ideology, which valorizes (male) sexual desire and one’s ability to repress and/or redirect it as one comes of age, thus legitimizing one’s status on the market. Even if one does not fully subscribe to Deleuze and Guattari’s radical renunciation of the

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Sacks, *English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985).

capitalist/Freudian understanding of desire as lack<sup>13</sup>, it remains questionable whether we can take Freud's ideas *in toto*, without further specifications.

One way to provide them is suggested in Jahan Ramazani's *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*.<sup>14</sup> Ramazani accepts the gist of Sacks's argument, similarly regarding elegy as a performance of mourning, but without a dogmatically Freudian interpretation of it. He argues that "normative" (i.e., Freudian) mourning is but one possible plotline that many elegies actively engage or, especially in the case of twentieth-century elegies, resist. Considering elegiac mourning in the context of other social rituals of mourning, such as obituaries and funerals, Ramazani demonstrates how closely related these practices are and how innovations in medicine influenced elegiac discourse.

There have been, however, attempts to read poetry from a more sociological perspective. Among the more successful is Walter Benjamin's *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*.<sup>15</sup> This volume comprises three separate pieces, two of which were meant to become a part of Benjamin's unfinished *Arcades Project*. Benjamin argues for a perspective on Baudelaire as the first true poet of the new urban environment. The poet becomes a typical urban dweller but also a *flâneur*, a man of the crowd who roams aimlessly and restlessly around the city with no particular purpose. Such wandering is, in Benjamin's reading, not just a habit or an

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<sup>13</sup> See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, New York: Viking Press, 1977.

<sup>14</sup> Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, London and New York: Verso, 1997.

indulgent behavior but a poetic stance or poetic strategy which defines the mode of production and the self-awareness of the first self-proclaimed modern poet. Benjamin writes:

The flâneur is someone abandoned in the crowd. In this he shares the situation of the commodity. He is not aware of this special situation, but this does not diminish its effect on him and it permeates him blissfully like a narcotic that can compensate him for many humiliations. The intoxication to which the flâneur surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers.<sup>16</sup>

This commodification of poetry and poet which Benjamin mentions (but does not develop) seems a very provocative idea. An immediate objection to this idea is that poetry has never been properly commodified as prose narratives have been. It simply does not sell that well. One can even say that poetry has most successfully resisted commodification. The market value of a poem is almost always not only very low but also practically irrelevant. What Benjamin argues, however, is not that poetry is or becomes a commodity but rather that there exists a fantasy (which Benjamin registers as a characteristically modernist fantasy) of presenting, interpreting, the poet as a commodity. Such fantasy or, perhaps, anxiety is covertly expressed in these lines from Alexandr Vvedenskii's 1934 poem "Мне жаль, что я не зверь"<sup>17</sup> ("It's a pity that I'm not a beast"). In the poem, Vvedenskii repeatedly exclaims at the end of each stanza: "I also have a claim, || that I should be a carpet, a hydrangea" ("Есть еще у меня претензия, || Что я не ковер, не гортензия"). While Vvedenskii's poetry is more habitually seen as a paradigmatic example of literary non-conformism (in the political, but also in the economic

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>17</sup> Aleksandr Vvedenskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvuh tomah*, V.1, Moscow: Gilea, 1993, 258.

sense of that word), it is revealing to see how anxiety over commodification speaks through the apparent disguise of existential concerns listed in that poem. I will show similar motifs when I talk about Mandel'shtam's poetry, and I will unmask his veiled attempts to come to terms with the discontents of advanced capitalist economy just as he pretends to speak solely about poetry.

In Richard Sieburth's "In Pound We Trust,"<sup>18</sup> the poetry of Ezra Pound is read against the background of Pound's economic theories. As Sieburth argues, beginning with very early Imagist poems Pound would often employ the rhetoric of economic exchange in both talking about poetry and also writing poetry. The minimalism of his early verse is understood in terms of Pound's aversion to the mediated economic exchange. Pound chooses to strip his verse of unnecessary signifiers. Sieburth reads this poetic asceticism in the context of Pound's proclaimed aversion to central banking and sentimental valorization of direct barter as the fairest form of economic exchange. As Sieburth suggests, the predominantly agrarian scenery of Pound's "Cantos" allows Pound to bracket the question of production.

Furthermore, Sieburth argues that in Pound's late verse, the very doubts that concerned economics apply just as much to the poetry. At the center of Sieburth's argument is an analysis of Pound's recurring suspicion that writing poetry might, after all, be much more closely related to financial operations than one would normally think. Pound's later lyrics actively evoke this idea and attempt to resist it:

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<sup>18</sup> R. Sieburth, "In Pound We Trust: The Economy of Poetry/ The Poetry of Economics," *Critical Inquiry* 14, no. 1 (Autumn, 1987): 142–172.

For if poetry can be made out of nothing more than “a mouthful of air” (as he liked to quote Yeats), what then distinguishes it from the money that banks create ex nihilo? And if usury is akin to false-coining, what guarantees that poetry might not also succumb to the inspired counterfeitings of fiction or the golden deceits of catachresis. And if usury is based on money reproducing money, that is, on the narcissistic reduplication of the same, does this not also implicate the very workings of poetic language as rhyme and repetition—like begetting like, reiterative figures of the same?<sup>19</sup>

I believe that such anxiety over one’s own poetic output is specific to Ezra Pound. As I read Russian canonical poets of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, from Pushkin to Severianin, I expose their (often, not even fully articulated) concerns over the implicit involvement with the alternating presence of economic forces. From Pushkin’s “Пишу для себя, печатаю для денег”<sup>20</sup> (“I write for myself, but I publish for money”) to Mandel’shtam’s “С миром державным я был лишь ребячески связан”<sup>21</sup> (“I was only childishly involved with the world of power”), Russian poets did likewise acknowledge their involvement with the market, and surreptitiously informed their readers thereof.

In “Lyric in the Culture of Capitalism,” Frank Lentricchia considers and compares the poetic strategies and poetic trajectories of two prominent American modernist poets, Ezra Pound and Robert Frost, in the light of the increasing professionalization of literary market. Frost’s ambition to “make it economically as America’s poet,”<sup>22</sup> his attempt “to become a poet for all

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>20</sup> Pushkin, in a letter to Viazemsky, March 8, 1824. See A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, eds. V. D. Bonch-Bruевич et al., vol. 13, Moscow: Voskresenie, 1996, 88.

<sup>21</sup> Osip Mandel’shtam, *Stikhotvoreniia*, ed. S. V. Vasilenko & I. L. Freidin, Moscow: Respublika, 1992, 90-91.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Lentricchia, “Lyric in the Culture of Capitalism,” *American Literary History* 1 (Spring 1989): 65.

sorts and kinds,”<sup>23</sup> is contrasted with Pound’s attempt to mold a new kind of poetic identity.

Lentricchia argues that

... in modernism’s scene of emergence and triumph in America “Frost” and “Pound” may be, then, not so much names of authors who quarreled over basic issues as signs of cultural and social forces in struggle; forces whose difference presented themselves to Frost in 1913 as a choice between mass circulation and avant-garde little magazines; forces whose very difference would constitute the scene of what would be called modernism.<sup>24</sup>

The two poets’ reaction and response to the existing poetic tradition is what primarily defines their respective roles in modernist poetics. As a prime sample of this tradition, Lentricchia considers Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*—an extremely codified and normalized collection of English poetry, which sold hundreds of thousands of copies and was extremely popular with the new, bourgeois reading public across both sides of the Atlantic in the late nineteenth century. As such, for modernists like Pound and Eliot it became less of an anthology or collection that functioned as place to exhibit poetic feats and more of a normalizing commodity which reinforced the status quo. Pound was particularly vocal in his resistance to this anthology,<sup>25</sup> arguing that

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>25</sup> As well as its successors and analogues, e.g. F. K. Knowle’s *Golden Treasury of American Songs and Lyrics* (1898); Jessie Belle Rittenhouse’s *Little Book of Modern Verse*, which sold 100,000 copies but is virtually unknown today; and E. C. Stedman’s *American Anthology, 1787–1900* (1900).

.. literary contents of the book-as-commodity <...> were similarly transformed, in their literariness, into replications of each other, commodities of lyric sameness, literature reduced to what you could get uncut onto a page or two of a collection simply filled with things you could get uncut onto a page or two.<sup>26</sup>

In comparison with Lentricchia's analysis, one can observe that although the Russian tradition of lyric verse is probably less extensive and thus less prone to "anthologizing" (simply due to the fact that Russian literature started much later), it is still no less normalizing and prescriptive. The preservation of iambic tetrameter as the dominant meter of the Russian poetic canon, as well as the retention of rhyme all the way through the poetic experimentation of the twentieth century, bespeak an orientation towards "internal codification," which powerfully controls the limits of poetic innovation. Indeed, while English and American poetry of the second half of the twentieth century effectively dispensed with most formal prosodic attributes, Russian poetry continued to "rediscover" them in, say, the neo-classicism of Joseph Brodsky. Such programmatic formal conservatism may be interpreted in economic terms as well—it may be a sign of pervasive mistrust (on the part of the producers of poetry) of the readers' ability to tell poetic utterance, or poetic product, from other elements of discourse.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Frank Lentricchia, "Lyric in the Culture of Capitalism," *American Literary History* 1, Spring 1989, 70.

<sup>27</sup> Rhyme has become such a "trademark" of the Russian poetic tradition that someone like Arkadii Dragomoschenko, who by and large attempted to ignore rhyming, and who was—primarily for that reason---regarded with a great deal of suspicion by his fellow non-conformist authors (Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, in a private interview, 2004) was able to say in his poem "Воздух" [Air]:

Готовность рифмы и метра-- привычное средство,  
избавляющее от невроза,  
рудиментарные формы тоски  
по тому, что утрачено: смерти.

[The readiness of rhyme and meter—a familiar method, of getting rid of neurosis, rudimentary forms of yearning for what is lost: death]. See [www.vavilon.ru/texts/drago1-19.htm](http://www.vavilon.ru/texts/drago1-19.htm)



Still, all these examples of economic approaches to poetic discourse fall short of what this dissertation attempts to achieve. Perhaps a better understanding of the goals of this project can be conveyed if we evoke something like Pierre Bourdieu's *Rules of Art*,<sup>28</sup> which quarries the core principles of bourgeois ideology from a reading of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857). Bourdieu insists that the very structure of the narrative in this novel is reflective of the ongoing contemporaneous changes in French society. I found such a reading quite insightful. When I began working on this project, I visualized my project as an endeavor to subject Russian poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth century to a similar kind of intently sociological scrutiny; in other words, I meant to read Russian poetry just like Pierre Bourdieu read the nineteenth-century French novel.

As my dissertation grew I was drawing more and more critical tools from another work by the same author: Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production*.<sup>29</sup> In this book, the study of literature and literary development is replaced by an inquiry into the concept of the literary field (a subfield of the field of cultural production, which is, in turn, a subfield of the field of power, generally understood as the space of position-taking<sup>30</sup>). Bourdieu states:

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While prosodic matters are somewhat on the periphery of my research, I will be showing how some Russian poets (most notably, Boratynsky in "Рифма" ["Rhyme"]) dramatized the social connotations of prosody.

<sup>28</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996.

<sup>29</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. and ed. Randal Johnson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

The science of the literary field is a form of *analysis situs* which establishes that each position <...> is subjectively defined by the system of distinctive properties by which it can be situated relative to other positions; that every position, even the dominant one, depends for its very existence, and for the determinations it imposes on its occupants, on the other positions constituting the field; and that the structure of the field, i.e. the space of positions, is nothing other than the structure of the distributions of the capital of specific properties which govern success in the field and the winning of the external or specific profits (such as literary prestige) which are at stake in the field.<sup>31</sup>

Bourdieu thinks about the literary field in predominantly economic terms, which should not fool one into believing that he seeks to explicate literary dynamics as nothing but a struggle for profit. Introducing the concept of symbolic capital,<sup>32</sup> Bourdieu finds an effective way of talking about economics in literature without reducing this conversation to petty disputes over money. The literary field is not a homogenous entity, Bourdieu insinuates. While it does enforce certain rules, different agents in the field (i.e., different producers of literary goods) claim varying degrees of autonomy from it. The degree of such autonomy is one of the most important factors in determining the position of a particular agent in the field:

Within this logic, the relationship to the audience and, more exactly, economic or political interest in the sense of interest in success and in the related economic or political profit, constitute one of the bases for evaluating the producers and their products.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>32</sup> Understood as “the degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration, or honor and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge (*connaissance*) and recognition (*reconnaissance*),” Randal Johnson, “Editor’s Introduction: Pierre Bourdieu on Art, Literature, and Culture”, in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. and ed. Randal Johnson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 46.

Such a perspective is particularly important in the Russian context, where the idea of “art for art’s sake” gained special prominence at the end of the nineteenth century. Bourdieu’s framework allows one to differentiate easily between those agents in the field who are eager to follow the rules of the field to maximize their economic gains (say, the producers of the emergent mass literature in early twentieth-century Russia), and those who choose to hold on to their symbolic capital, and not to take the risk of staking it on the literary market. This latter stance is generally characteristic of the proponents of “pure art” movements, whose primary audience is (in the extreme case) limited to other producers of cultural goods. Such a stance of proclaiming one’s independence from the literary market often tries to imply an inbred resistance to any economic interpretation; therefore, Bourdieu’s analysis is markedly effective here since it positions the self-declared “outsiders” within the theoretical framework of the economics of literature. Since these self-declared “outsiders” constitute a very significant part of the poetic heritage of the Russian twentieth century, including not only the majority of the Silver Age poets, but also those who refused to participate in official Soviet literature after 1917 (like the authors of the “underground literature” of the 1960s-1980s), Bourdieu’s methodology enables me to engage all these authors on economic grounds, which has been the underlying purpose of my dissertation all along.

Lastly, John Guillory’s inquiry into the formation of the literary canon<sup>34</sup> was quite helpful to my research, and informed the writing of the first chapter of this dissertation. His analysis of the subtle negotiations or open conflicts between social classes, ideologies, and

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<sup>34</sup> John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

political forces that resulted in accepting some works as canonical and others as not was particularly instructive for me, since Russian culture of the early nineteenth century ostensibly modeled itself after Western patterns. Yet it was the minute differences accompanying the smuggling of ideologies across national borders that became particularly meaningful for my own research. Much of what Guillory says about canon formation applies to Russian culture as well; but it was the ways in which Russian aristocratic culture (and elegiac poetry in particular) departed from Western standards that became the subject of my first chapter.

## Chapter 1: Elegiac Poetry and the Advent of Literary Market

### Pushkin

In this chapter I am going to investigate the impact of the nascent capitalist economy upon the formation and development of Russian elegiac tradition in the 1810s–1840s. This period is characterized by the first attempts to “professionalize” literature, to treat it not merely as a leisurely pastime but also as a source of personal income and as a bourgeois trade. The figure of Pushkin will be central in this discussion, as he was one of the first writers to deal with the literary market and to attempt to keep in check and even preserve the autonomy of literary work and literary production. Pushkin’s own attempts to become a “professional writer” were largely unsuccessful: his popularity dwindled in the 1830s, and his own magazine, “Современник” [The Contemporary], was pretty much a flop and money sponge (his apartment was stuffed with unsold copies of the last issue of *Sovremennik* when he died). Nonetheless, his experience and his reflections on the relationship between creative writing and market economy became essential for later generations of Russian writers.

Indeed, Pushkin’s famous formula “пишу для себя, печатаю для денег”<sup>35</sup> [I write for myself, but I publish for money] attempts to differentiate and separate the literary market and the

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<sup>35</sup>“Благо я не принадлежу к нашим писателям 18-го века: я пишу для себя, а печатаю для денег, а ничуть для улыбки прекрасного пола.” Alexander Pushkin, in a letter to Viazemsky, March 8, 1824, in A. Pushkin, *Polnoe*

poet's dependence on publishing his works from the idea of writing characteristic of the eighteenth-century gentry, which views literature as an intimate, private occupation which serves nothing but personal amusement and diversion and can be only shared and circulated among a small group of friends. But the very wording of this dichotomy, and the implicit opposition of "public" vs. "private" it brings about, belongs to a kind of bourgeois ideology meant to separate and delineate the public (understood as something that concerns common interest and where, ideally, the interests of the bourgeois citizens coincide) and the private (understood as something that concerns only a particular member of the bourgeoisie, whose interests might not be the same as those of their neighbor). This opposition of public and private, which Pushkin's formula implicitly evokes, is only possible within a certain ideological and economic format: the expanding bourgeois society.

Pushkin's proclaimed attempt to differentiate and distance himself from the impending expansion and aggression of the new economy implicitly gestures towards the very discourse he is trying to keep in check. Pushkin's formula is using bourgeois terminology to control its ideology, so to speak, thus exposing what one may call a "difference within", which undermines or at least modifies the meaning of this utterance—it conforms to the bourgeois discourse as it attempts to resist it. This formula also strangely reverses the public and private domains. According to Habermas, money and economic relations in general belonged to the area of private interests of the bourgeois citizens, whereas literature served in his account as a prime example of

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*sobraniiie sochinenii*, eds. Maxim Gorky, S. M Bondi et al., Akademiia Nauk SSSR, vol. 13. Leningrad: Izdatelstvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1937, reprint Moscow: Voskresen'e, 1996, 89.

the public sphere that arose in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>36</sup> Pushkin's formulation reverses the terms: writing is private, intimate, and personal enterprise, not something to be shared with or judged by the public. When a work is published or sold, it loses for Pushkin its intimate and personal connection with the author; it becomes a public event and is open to the judgment of the bourgeois reader. Such an upside-down take on the division of public and private is probably indicative of the rather peculiar situation in early-nineteenth-century Russia, where, due to the effective lack of the bourgeoisie, the Russian aristocracy was the primary recipient and propagator of liberal thought.

The theme of selling one's writing and becoming a player on the literary market comes back in many Pushkin's later texts, such as "Разговор книгопродавца с поэтом"<sup>37</sup> ("Conversation of a book-seller with a poet," 1824 ) and a short story, "Египетские ночи"<sup>38</sup> ("Egyptian nights," 1835). In these texts he probably came closest to elucidating his rather multilayered perspective on the relationship between money and writing, a perspective that strove to negotiate between Romantic ideas of an inspired poet who thinks little of the opinions of the crowd and the increasingly important role that a bourgeois reader played in literary economy.

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<sup>36</sup>Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991, 36-42.

<sup>37</sup>A. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, eds. Maxim Gorky, S. M Bondi et al., vol. 3 no. 1, Leningrad: Izdatelstvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1947, reprint Moscow: Voskresenie, 1995, 324-330.

<sup>38</sup>A. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, eds. Maxim Gorky, S. M Bondi et al., vol. 8 no. 1, Leningrad: Izdatelstvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1948, reprint Moscow: Voskresenie, 1995, 261-276.

In “Разговор книгопродавца с поэтом,” which served as an introduction to the first two editions of *Eugene Onegin*’s (1823) first chapter, Pushkin stages the negotiation between literary market, personified in the figure of book-seller, and the Romantic poet, who attempts to reject and ignore it but is eventually led to comply in a Socratic-styled argument.<sup>39</sup> Both the poet and the bookseller converse in iambic tetrameter, but when the deal is struck in the last line of the poem, the narrative switches to prose: “Вы совершенно правы. Вот вам моя рукопись. Условимся” [You are absolutely right. Here’s my manuscript. Let’s negotiate the details]. The idea that makes the poet accept the book-seller’s proposition is that in modern society, freedom is impossible without money (“Наш век - торгаш; в сей век железный | Без денег и свободы нет,” “Our Age is a huckster; in this Iron Age | there is no freedom without money”). The book-seller’s decisive formula, “Не продается вдохновенье, | Но можно рукопись продать” [Inspiration does not sell, but one can sell a manuscript], capitalizes on the alienation of the product of labor (the manuscript) from the labor itself (inspiration). This distinction allows the poet to retain his identity of an inspired Romantic genius, but it also implicitly acknowledges this capitalist alienation. Thus it makes his “concession” to capitalism and market rather ambiguous—the poet gives up his product, yet he insists that what is of real value to him is not the product but the making of it. If this poem raises the question of how one can be a Romantic poet in the age of market relations, then the answer it gives is intentionally deceptive, because it

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<sup>39</sup>In his seminal book “Rozhdenie realizma v tvorchestve Pushkina” Sergei Bondi emphasizes Pushkin’s utter disappointment in the romantic ideal, which he views as a psychological state verging on depression and misanthropy. In contrast to the present argument, Bondi refuses to allow that the Book-Seller’s pragmatism has any truth of its own but views this figure as a pure manifestation of philistinism and cynical immorality. See S. M. Bondi, “Rozhdenie realizma v tvorchestve Pushkina,” in S. M. Bondi. *O Pushkine: Stat’i i issledovaniia*. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1978, 31-34. The economic perspective adopted here, however, sees more of a dialogic interaction between the book-seller and poet.



relies on the very capitalist distinction between the work and the product. That is to say, it is only when one agrees to play by the rules of the market and to make a distinction between the product and the labor that the identity of a gentry-born Romantic poet can be preserved.

This formula also introduces, although indirectly and in disguise, the concept of copyright. Indeed, the poet here is not selling “the manuscript” per se but the rights to publish it—even though it was still three years before the first legislation regulating this subject was passed in Russia (“Устав о цензуре,” The Statute about Censorship, 1828). This statute maintains a distinction between the text as an object that can be sold, traded, lost, burnt, etc. and the symbolic value of the text, which this legislative act means to enforce and protect. Curiously, this first Russian copyright law was among the strictest of the day. The British “Statute of Anne” from 1710 guaranteed fourteen years of copyright to authors of original works published after the statute’s enactment and twenty-one years if they had been published before,<sup>40</sup> whereas Russian law also protected the rights of the translators, and provided lifetime copyright to them, plus twenty-five years of *post mortem auctoris* to their heirs. As it happened, Pushkin’s widow petitioned for and was granted an extension of this term to fifty years—a duration comparable to modern copyright regulations. Of course, actual practice was very different, and many of Pushkin’s works were published without royalties being paid to him or his descendants.

It is interesting to notice, then, that while Pushkin’s poem does in effect discuss the selling of publication rights, it actively resists the economic and legal jargon that is associated with this. Pushkin’s poet sells the ‘manuscript’—which, of course, implies the rights to print and

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<sup>40</sup>Deazley Ronan, *Rethinking Copyright: History, Theory, Language*, Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishers, 2006, 13.

publish—but retains the ‘inspiration,’ whereas, in fact, it is the manuscript (or a copy of it, anyway) that would still remain in his possession after the deal was concluded. There might be several explanations for that palpable resistance to speak the jargon of intellectual property laws. First, as the poem was written full three years before the first legal regulation regarding copyright was passed in Russia, the very rhetoric of selling the symbolic rights to print and publish was pretty much nonexistent. One may also say, however, that this avoidance was indicative of Pushkin’s overall strategy of responding to the market, whereby he would evasively accept it in a gesture of resisting it, comply, and maybe conform to it by pretending to disobey.

“Египетские ночи” is a late short story by Pushkin, written in 1835 but not published during his lifetime<sup>41</sup>. It presents two poets, one a supposed alter ego of the author himself,<sup>42</sup> the aristocratic writer Charsky, who is somewhat embarrassed by his popularity with readers and ashamed of his image and status as a poet, and the Italian improviser who seeks Charsky’s patronage and is looking to earn his living by performing poetry in front of an audience. Although the Russian poet is embarrassed by the possibility of earning money by performing poetry and the Italian seems to be thinking of nothing but this, the two poets “bond” over the

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<sup>41</sup> A comprehensive analysis of the work’s genesis and main themes is presented in Leslie O’Bell, *Pushkin's Egyptian Nights: the Biography of a Work*, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984.

<sup>42</sup> “Charsky ... is very much the dandy type, and among all Pushkin's heroes, probably closest to representing Pushkin himself” (Sam Driver, *Pushkin: Literature and Social Ideas*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989, 99). This passage is part of Driver's broad discussion of Pushkin's involvement with dandyism upon which, according to him, Charsky's autobiographic connection is based. *Ibid.*, 77-102.

authenticity of inspired poetic utterance, and Charsky recognizes and acknowledges the Italian improviser as his true fellow poet.<sup>43</sup>

Yet the two poets have more in common than their mutually recognized poetic talent. Both are shown to be imperfect, contaminated poetic figures, and it is their “corruption” which effectively foils the nature and the “truth” of their gift. Pushkin spends much of the first chapter discussing and presenting ways in which Charsky resists the label of a poet. Charsky often acts falsely and pretends to like things almost in spite of his actual inclinations:

Он прикидывался то страстным охотником до лошадей, то отчаянным игроком, то самым тонким гастрономом; хотя никак не мог различить горской породы от арабской, никогда не помнил козырей и втайне предпочитал печеный картофель всевозможным изобретениям французской кухни” [He pretended to be a passionate connoisseur of horses, or a reckless gambler, or a most subtle gourmet; but he never could tell a highland breed from an Arabian, never remembered the trumps and secretly preferred baked potato to all the inventions of French cuisine].<sup>44</sup>

This revelation of Charsky’s attempts to camouflage his everyday diversions and recreations and it underscores his status as a Romantic poet. Poetry is no longer allowed to be “just that,” and poets cannot be simply poets any longer—unless they want to risk being recognized as such by the bourgeois reading public and becoming players on the literary market

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43 L. A. Stepanov, in his analysis of the literary sources and real life prototypes of the Improviser shows that this Pushkin's character is generalized to a very high degree. It incorporates traits of both literary and real life artists-improvisers, including the poet Adam Mickiewicz who possessed the gift of improvisation (L. A. Stepanov, “Ob istochnikakh obraza improvizatora v “Egipetskikh nochakh,” in *Pushkin: Issledovaniia i materialy*, vol. 10, Leningrad: Nauka, 1982, 168-175). It follows from this analysis that Pushkin does not make a sharp distinction between an improviser-artist and improviser-poet; whereas literary and real life improvisers could not be acknowledged poets in the strict sense, Mickiewicz was both.

<sup>44</sup>Alexander Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, eds. Maxim Gorky, S. M Bondi et al., vol. 8, no. 1, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1948, reprint Moscow: Voskresenie, 1995, 264.

and producers of goods just like any other capitalist trader. It is only this insistence on hiding and pretending to conform that allows modern Romantic poets to survive while at the same time waxing nostalgic for times when being a poet did not imply a slew of unpleasant and degrading economic consequences. The presentation of Charsky's social activities has a very strong moral undertone—it is almost like a list of “necessary sins” one must commit in this imperfect, tainted world.

The Italian's way of positioning himself in the poetic field is similar. He is an improviser, and the performance of his poetry evokes the Romantic idea of an inspired poet—yet it is his proficiency in responding to the demands of his audience, his ability to swiftly and seamlessly adapt and conform to the theme given to him, that uncannily discloses him as an apt trader and a bourgeois who knows well his market and eagerly anticipates its needs and desires. It is also this same proficiency which makes him a true poet in the eyes of Charsky. The Italian poet's passion for “selling his inspiration” molds and delineates his poetic identity, the identity which has become inseparable from regard for literature as profession. If Charsky is afraid of professionalizing his talent and chooses to “connect” with the bourgeois world in other ways, his Italian counterpart actively insists on and reinforces his status as a seller of poetic goods. The Italian even displays a recognizable Romantic negligence toward his production (comparable, one might say, with the infatuation with fragmentariness, casualness, and unfinishedness as a marker of truth that characterized early-nineteenth-century culture—after all, everything this Italian declaims is both fragmentary and unfinished). But in his case, it is fluently reinterpreted as interest in his pay, not the work or the product: “Итальянец при сем случае обнаружил такую дикую жадность, такую простодушную любовь к прибыли, что он опротивел

Чарскому” [On that occasion, the Italian revealed such barbaric greed, such ingenuous interest in profit that Charsky became disgusted with him].<sup>45</sup> This reinterpretation of casualness toward one’s poetry as monetary interest obliquely describes the Italian improviser as a similarly and equally contaminated, impure figure, a figure of negotiation and dialogue between the sketched and disappearing pre-market ideals of “pure” poetry and the pressing needs of the day, which assign monetary, economic value to poetic utterance.

The unfinished poem which concludes “Египетские ночи” in a strange but unequivocal way comments on the anxieties of trading. It evokes what is sometimes viewed as a master plot of bourgeois economy: the theme of selling sex, or prostitution. The poem was written in 1824 and was provisionally titled “Клеопатра”<sup>46</sup> [Cleopatra] but never published. It recounts a dubious episode from Cleopatra’s biography: she offers sex to her guests at the price of their death at the end of the night. Although the trade does not involve money, Pushkin persistently employs the rhetoric of economic exchange to describe this transaction:

В моей любви для вас блаженство?  
Блаженство можно вам купить...  
Внемлите ж мне: могу равенство  
Меж нами я восстановить.  
Кто к торгу страстному приступит?  
Свою любовь я продаю;  
Скажите: кто меж вами купит  
Ценою жизни ночь мою?

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 270.

<sup>46</sup>Alexander Pushkin, *Polnoe sobraniie sochinenii*, eds. Maxim Gorky, S. M Bondi et al., vol. 3, no. 1, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1948, reprint Moscow: Voskresenie, 1995, 130-132.

(You find blissfulness in my love? | You can purchase blissfulness... | Heed me: I can restore | Equality between us. | Who is going to start the passionate auction? | I'm selling my love; | Tell me: who among you will buy | At the price of death a night with me?)

While the price of death at which one can purchase a night with Cleopatra suggests the natural economy of a pre-capitalist society, the discourse of monetary exchange and negotiation (“торгу страстному,” “passionate auctioning,” “любовь я продаю,” “selling my love,” “блаженство можно вам купить,” “you can purchase blissfulness”) reminds the reader of the symbolic nature of the deal. Selling at the price of death is, one might say, a kind of illocutionary suicide, as the very idea of the symbolic exchange is perched on excluding death and the death penalty from hierarchical structures of society. One would not expect to sell goods at the price of killing the buyer. Clearly, then, Cleopatra is fantasizing: she is attempting to describe, to assign, to evaluate the value of spending a night with a godlike queen (certainly a taboo in a class society) in terms of market economy. As such, her offer is “priceless,” which to say, the price is so high that no mortal will be able to pay it and will therefore be sentenced to death.

Cleopatra also evokes the idea of democratic equality (“могу равенство | Меж нами я восстановить,” “I can restore equality between us”), implying a kind of social mobility and fluidity which is evidently suggestive of bourgeois consciousness. But the equality is purely optative and performative—it can be achieved by purchasing a night with the queen, and the price of that is the death of the buyer and hence the collapse of the rhetoric of symbolic exchange. In other words, a world where the queen can be “sold” and where she becomes a prostitute is also a world where the witness and participant of this transaction will die and where, therefore, the very idea of purchasing is not really functional.

As it appears, then, the short verse fragment intimates a possibility of social mobility but powerfully controls it by insisting on the inevitable demise of those who go too far and attempt to tackle matters beyond their reach. In a way, it deals with the same subject as the prose part of “Египетские ночи”—the confusion and disarray brought about by the expansion of capitalism—but does so in a much more resolute, determined, nonconformist manner. If in prose Pushkin agreed to the necessity of negotiation and dialogue with the new economic structures, here—perhaps feeling more at home and more secure in the familiar space of iambic tetrameter—he only acknowledges the possibility of symbolic, market interpretation but goes on to demonstrate its inevitable collapse when it endeavors to cross the reified boundaries of class, truth, and tradition.

Pushkin’s attempts to adapt to and control the new economic realia can be explored further if we bring under critical scrutiny his famous elegy “Когда за городом, задумчив, я брожу”<sup>47</sup> (“When, pensive, I roam beyond the city,” 1836). I argue that this poem most precisely and emphatically elucidates the poet’s struggle with the emergent bourgeois consciousness. I read this elegy in the context of Zhukovsky’s elegy “Сельское кладбище”<sup>48</sup> (“A Countryside Cemetery,” 1802), a translation of Thomas Gray’s famous long poem “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1750). Pushkin was certainly familiar with the translation<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Alexander Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, eds. Maxim Gorky, S. M Bondi et al., vol. 3 no. 1, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1948, reprint Moscow: Voskresenie, 1995, 422-423.

<sup>48</sup>Vasiliy Zhukovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v dvenadtsati tomakh*, vol. 1, Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury, 1999-2000, 53-57.

<sup>49</sup>As Viktor Toporov demonstrates, Zhukovsky's translation was a successful attempt to create a new language for Russian lyric poetry. See V. N. Toporov, “Sel'skoe kladbische Zhukovskogo: k istokam russkoi poezii,” in *Russian Literature*, vol. X, Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1981, 242-282.

(although he probably did not read the original), and I regard this poem as a response to Zhukovsky's translation and, thus, as an oblique response to Gray's poem itself.

Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" has been regarded as a manifesto of bourgeois ideology by John Guillory in his *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*.<sup>50</sup> Guillory understands the indirect, oblique concern for the poor which the poet expresses upon visiting a country cemetery ("Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest, | Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood") as indicative of a particular strain in the bourgeois ideology which sought to encourage the growing social mobility of the increasingly urban society, yet at the same time strove to keep it in check and under control—hence the optative quality of this concern. In Guillory's reading, Gray's poem is not simply about the physical death which makes us all equal, but is rather about the equalizing role of the epitaph, as a sign of the suppression of the subject who, disjoined from any distinctions attached to material existence, now receives a new existence through the text of the epitaph: "Death is the signifier of an attractive self-repression (self-burial), an almost successful repression of a subject who yet leaves behind the trace of his repression in the form of somewhat lengthy epitaph."<sup>51</sup> Existence through an epitaph seems to know no distinctions, and the poet goes so far as to imply an exchange of roles, imagining that someday he himself will be buried in the very same cemetery and some "hoary swain" will visit his grave just as he is now visiting the graves of the poor. The introduction of this figure reinforces the intimated exchange of roles with "instability of

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<sup>50</sup>In John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, 85-133.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid*, 116.



reference” as the poem quotes “the swain on the death of the poet who is himself writing the lines the swain speaks.”<sup>52</sup>

However, as Guillory emphasizes, the exchange of roles is not complete, because class distinctions are preserved through swain's inability to read the epitaph. The condition of literacy evoked by the scene with the epitaph interferes with a full fusion between the poet and the peasant. Guillory reasons:

The narrative <...> brings the conditions of literary production into relation with the orders of social distinction by foregrounding in an egregious parenthesis the fact of literacy as a requisite to the reception of that text: “Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay.”<sup>53</sup>

This illiteracy is particularly meaningful given the poem’s preoccupation with exploring and defining the concept of literacy as cultural capital that distinguishes the new bourgeois reader. As

Guillory further reasons in analyzing the Miltonic intertexts in the *Elegy*,

*Only death* can silence Milton in the imaginary narrative future of *Lycidas*, but the “mute, inglorious Milton” of the *Elegy* is silenced by what constitutes *muteness*—not an inability to speak but an inability to read and write. Hence Gray dissociates himself from his “hoary-headed swain” by reclaiming his higher social station, by reasserting his position within (at the least) a literate culture.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 116.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 116.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid, 116.

Thus it appears to be playing out a classic trick of bourgeois ideology: it expresses concern for the underrepresented but at the same time secretly pledges to maintain the status quo. This ambivalence toward social mobility is very characteristic of bourgeois consciousness of the time—increased social mobility is perceived as liberatory but also as a source of potential danger. Elegy becomes a perfect medium for such a twofold, ambivalent perspective: it conveys sympathy at the sight of loss (both a loss of life and also, implicitly, a loss or lack of social opportunities for those buried there). But at the same time, it chooses pacifying, calm, nonviolent resolution, a resolution that ascribes death and social injustice to the natural order of things and presents the social order as being just as inevitable as is the order of life and death. Such a compromising, reconciliatory, negotiating perspective ensures that this poem can be persuasively read as both promoting social change and advocating social mobility but also effectively keeping in check any attempts at an actual reversal of social roles.

Catherine Ciepiela's essay "Rereading Russian Pastoral: Zhukovsky's Translation of Gray's Elegy" takes Guillory's argument one step further, focusing on Zhukovsky's first published translation of Gray's poem and arguing that Zhukovsky responds to Gray's ideological message by creating his own model of power relations in society.<sup>55</sup> Zhukovsky's model is reflective of the particular situation in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Russia. In this free translation of the poem, minute but plentiful digressions from the original create ideological tension. As Ciepiela suggests, the virtual absence of the bourgeoisie in Russia at the time meant that gentry culture was the primary recipient and propagator of Enlightenment

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<sup>55</sup> Catherine Ciepiela, "Rereading Russian Pastoral: Zhukovsky's Translation of Gray's Elegy" in Stephanie Sandler, ed., *Rereading Russian Poetry*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, 31-57.

discourse. The original poem's anxieties over the status of the bourgeoisie would have been alien and incomprehensible to the Russian reading public, but the Russian aristocracy of the time was very similarly torn between its ancestral allegiance to monarchical powers and its newly discovered identity as the literate and enlightened class, an identity which unequivocally entailed confrontation with autocratic rule.

Zhukovsky's translation, as Ciepiela demonstrates, represents this ambivalence and uncertainty very powerfully. Zhukovsky replaces the pervasive "I" of the lyric persona in Gray's original with the inconclusive "we"; he stylistically shortens the distance between the poet and the village dweller; and, most importantly, he obscures the swain's often-mentioned illiteracy (in direct contrast with the original's "for thou canst read"). This suggests a much lesser distance between the villager and the swain. The universality of human emotion here seems to almost override distinctions between classes.

Pushkin's "Когда за городом, задумчив, я брожу" has more than once been analyzed by leading scholars of Russian verse, but nobody has ever considered this poem in the context of Zhukovsky's translation of Gray's elegy. Lidia Ginzburg, for example, reads this poem as an example of Pushkin's moving away from the tenets of the classical Russian elegiac school<sup>56</sup>. She argues that here Pushkin restores "вещественный смысл" [the material meaning] to elegiac epithets<sup>57</sup>. Yurii Lotman positions this poem upon the opposition of "temporality," which is the site of the city, the urban life, where even corpses are described as guests, transient visitors, in

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<sup>56</sup>Lidia Ginzburg, *O lirike*, Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel, 1974, 240-242.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 241.

contrast with “eternity,” which is reserved for the countryside<sup>58</sup>. Not going against these readings, I intend to extend and enhance them by considering Pushkin’s poem as an implicit response to Zhukovsky’s translation (and through that, to Gray’s original), a response which acknowledges and recognizes the ideological aspirations of the earlier texts but resolves them in a drastically different manner.

Indeed, the poem opens in a recognizable elegiac mode, “Когда за городом, задумчив, я брожу/ И на публичное кладбище захожу...” [When, pensive, I roam beyond the city, and visit the public cemetery], which is immediately lost when the poet finds himself in the public cemetery. Instead of anticipated metaphoricity and transcendence in representing death, Pushkin’s description is particularly circumstantial and explicit:

Когда за городом, задумчив, я брожу  
И на публичное кладбище захожу,  
Решетки, столбики, нарядные гробницы,  
Под коими гниют все мертвецы столицы,  
В болоте кое-как стесненные рядком,  
Как гости жадные за нищенским столом,  
Купцов, чиновников усопших мавзолеи.  
Дешевого резца нелепые затеи,  
Над ними надписи в прозе и в стихах  
О добродетели, о службе и чинах;  
По старом рогаче вловицы плач амурный;  
Ворами со столбов отвинченные урны,  
Могила склизкие, которые также тут,  
Зеваючи, жильцов к себе на утро ждут, —

[When I ramble beyond the city | And stop by the public cemetery, | The lattices,  
columns, elegant tombs, | Under which all the dead people of the capital are rotting, |

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<sup>58</sup>Yuri Lotman, *Analiz poeticheskogo teksta. Struktura stikha*, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976, 115-119.

Somehow constrained together in the swamp, | Like greedy guests at the beggars' table, |  
The mausoleums of the deceased merchants and clerks, | The clumsy tricks of the cheap  
chisel, | And above them the inscriptions in prose and in verse, | About the virtue, the  
service and the ranks, | The widow's amorous lament for her cuckold husband, | The urns  
screwed away by the thieves, | The slippery graves which are also here, | Yawningly  
waiting for tenants in the morning]

This agglomeration of social attributes is clearly evocative of city life, which mixes people and classes with ease. The poem emphasizes the diversity and variety of the cemetery, which gives harbor to all. In spite of representing the site of death, the poem is unusually dynamic and mobile. The cramped, constricted environment is teeming with activity. Even the dead themselves are described as actors, agents performing a task (“мертвецы,” “corpses,” is an animate noun in Russian, which implies a high degree of agency): they are rotting (“под которыми гниют все мертвецы столицы,” “Under which all the dead people of the capital are rotting”). The public cemetery does retain some social attributes of those buried there. Even the table of ranks is implicitly mentioned (“о добродетели, о службе и чинах,” “About the virtue, the service, and the ranks”). But the lack of space, the compressed environment of the city cemetery, precludes the preservation of social distinctions. The cemetery becomes a virtual copy of the city itself, the city as a site of social intermingling and contamination, a locus of social mobility where borders and boundaries are easily crossed. This is further emphasized by the implicit threat of the socially underrepresented (the thieves), who have taken away the urns (“ворами со столбов отчинченные урны,” “The urns screwed away by the thieves”). Everyone is alike there, but unlike the optative equality in death in Gray and Zhukovsky, here death equates all not in eternity but in poverty, and because of that, in oblivion. Attempts to preserve the identity of the dead are either thwarted or disclosed as ridiculous, untrue (“По старом пораче

вдовицы плач амурный,” “The widow’s amorous lament for her cuckold husband”). Even the graves in the last lines of the stanza become like urban landlords who yawningly await their tenants’ arrival in the morning (“зеваючи жильцов к себе наутро ждут”).

The elegiac mode is recovered in the second stanza, where the poet visits his familial burial grounds in the countryside. The usual tropes of elegiac immortality return here: the dead are not really dead, but sleeping (“дремлют мертвые в торжественном покое,” “The dead slumber in solemn repose”). The figure of vegetative immortality—the oak—powerfully protects the solemnity of the site (“стоит высоко дуб над важными гробами,” “The oak stands tall above the important coffins”). The poem does also articulate the social circumstances that facilitated the return of the elegiac representation: it is a familial cemetery (“кладбище родовое”), which secures the class identity of those buried there. This identity is further protected from the invasion of the non-privileged (“к ним ночью темною не лезет бледный вор,” “A pale thief is not sneaking toward them at night”) in an obvious contrast to the public cemetery of the first stanza. The vast expanses of the countryside ensure that the dead are not mixed up (“там неукрашенным могилам есть простор”); everyone and everything is retained in its entirety. The country cemetery even appears healthier than its city counterpart, as it lacks the “безносые гении” (nose-less geniuses)—a transparent reference to syphilis, a quite common ailment among the aristocracy of the time.

Even the swain from Gray’s “Elegy” makes a comeback here, appearing as “селянин с молитвой и со вздохом” [A swain coming with a prayer and a sigh], yet unlike in Gray’s and Zhukovsky’s texts, he is merely a passerby, an uninvolved observer who is but a witness of the scene. In Zhukovsky’s translation the swain (“селянин”) can speak, is given agency, and, after

the poet's death, remembers the poet just as the poet remembered those buried at the cemetery ("Быть может селянин с почтенной сединою | Так будет о тебе пришельцу говорить," "Perhaps the gray-haired swain | Will tell this about you to the newcomer"). The swain in Pushkin's poem, in an implicit but very important contrast to Zhukovsky's poem, is silent and not participating. He's sighing and praying, but his laments and prayers are not part of the mournful landscape of the familial cemetery. He signifies the distance and the difference between the familial cemetery and the rustic population. He might be an important spectator, but he is never a participant in the affairs and feelings of the elegist.

As it stands, Pushkin's poem certainly responds to the liberatory aspirations of Zhukovsky's and Gray's poems, but it does so in a way that undermines and restricts them. "Когда за городом, задумчив, я брожу" effectively resists liberal aspirations to foster and encourage the growing social mobility of the urban life. It securely ties the elegiac mode of representation with the countryside estate, where the identity of land-owning aristocracy is still intact and not jeopardized by the advent of market relations pervading the public, city cemetery. The poet acknowledges the anxiety over the increasing social mobility brought about by emergent capitalism, but he chooses to negotiate with it by reserving a place for himself and his poetics in the safety of his own estate.

## Boratynsky

While Boratynsky's lyrics are often analyzed in light of his continuous drifting away from the canons of the "school of elegiac precision," I wonder to what extent we can interpret his digressions from the norms and standards of the elegiac genre as an attempt to both resist and adapt to the impact of market economy on the endangered authenticity of lyric production.<sup>59</sup> We have seen that in one of Pushkin's late poems, capitalism is persistently and dangerously present, yet restrained and successfully controlled. I will argue that Boratynsky's verse is much more cautious but also more inventive and resourceful in dealing with the perceived peril of impending capitalism. Boratynsky does not find a happy refuge from the anxieties of modern life in the safety of a private estate, but he comes up with, if not more effective, then at least more unusual methods to combat it. Consider, for example, the last poem from his breakthrough collection "Сумерки" [Twilight], "Рифма" ("Rhyme," 1839).<sup>60</sup> It deals with two poets—a modern one, a supposed alter ego of the author, and an ancient bard of the heroic past who declaims his poetry in front of a large crowd at the Olympic Games. The ancient poet exists in a blissful state of harmony with his audience. His words are not just heard and heeded; they effectively move his audience, driving it to almost erotic rapture:

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<sup>59</sup>Lidia Ginzburg, *O lirike*, Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel, 1974.

<sup>60</sup>Evgenii Baratynskii, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii*, vol. 2, Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel, 1936, 235-236.



Толпа вниманием окована была  
Пока, могучим сотрясением  
Вдруг побежденная, плескала без конца.

(The crowd's attention was held as if fettered | Until suddenly defeated by a mighty shock  
| It was applauding without stop).

In a dramatic contrast to this powerful presentation, the modern poet is alone, torn, and tortured by anxieties and uncertainties. His words are not sought for, and therefore he cannot determine the true value of his poetry, being the only judge if not the only reader of it. The poet laments the lack of public space, a public sphere where his poetry can exist and be performed: “Но нашей мысли торжищ нет, | Но нашей мысли нет форума!” (“But there is no market for our thought, there is no forum for it!”). Interestingly, the poem evokes the image of the market here (the Old Church Slavonic form “торжище” can be found in Vladimir Dal’s dictionary under the entry for “торговать,” “to trade,” as a public venue for trade operations)—but probably more in the sense of a place where poetry is performed rather than sold. “Торжище” is equated with the Latin “forum”—also a market, but etymologically linked to the idea of talking and public performance (“for, fori” is an old Latin verb meaning “to speak of,” “to talk”).

This lack of public space conditions the solitude of modern poet. This lack also makes it impossible to evaluate his production, as its effect upon the public cannot be measured (“Меж нас не ведает поэт, | Высок его полет иль нет, | Велика ль творческая дума,” “Our poet does not know, | Whether he’s flying high or not, | How great is his creative mediation”). The absence of the recipient undermines the completeness of the speech act. This situation is described in legal terms suggestive of the guilt-ridden modern consciousness (“Сам судия и подсудимый,” “You are both the judge and the accused/judged”). The poem then remembers, but refuses to

accept, a tired Romantic trope of illness as evidence of true talent (“Скажи—твой беспокойный жар | Смешной недуг иль высший дар,” Tell me—your restless fever | Is it a ridiculous ailment or a higher gift?). Thus it effectively distances the poet not only from his much more welcomed predecessor but also from contemporary Romantic poets who would seek to emphasize the restless fever of poetic creation as a sign of its worth. Indeed, the modern poet is nothing like his successful and desired ancient counterpart—it is the palpable discrepancy between the two poets that this juxtaposition seems to insist on.

Curiously, this poem by Boratynsky is actually a response to Batiushkov’s late poem “К творцу ‘Истории государства российского’”<sup>61</sup> (“To the creator of the ‘History of the Russian State’”) whose opening line Boratynsky quotes verbatim:

Когда на играх Олимпийских  
В надежде радостных похвал  
Отец истории читал,  
Как грек разил вождей азийских

(When at the Olympic Games | In hopes of mirthful praise | The father of history read |  
How the Greek defeated the enemies from Asia).

The short missive narrates a legendary episode from Greek history: that of Herodotus reading excerpts from his *History of Greco-Persian Wars* in front of a large crowd in Athens, where, among others, Thucydides (the future author of *The History of the Peloponnesian War*)

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<sup>61</sup>Konstantin Batiushkov, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii*. Moscow-Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel, 1964, 233-234.

was also present<sup>62</sup>. Batiushkov likens himself to the latter, metaphorically becoming an heir to Karamzin, much as Thucydides is often regarded as an heir to Herodotus in ancient historiography. Karamzin did not actually write about the Napoleonic Wars, in which Batiushkov participated, thus further enhancing the comparison. Just as Thucydides was to carry on Herodotus's history by writing *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Batiushkov promises to continue Karamzin's oeuvre and write his own account of the Napoleonic Wars. While not technically an elegy, this poem employs a familiar elegiac structure of poetic succession, which indirectly empowers the sender as he is celebrating achievements of the recipient.

The intention of Boratynsky's response, if we were to read it as such, becomes therefore much more apparent, as his "Рифма" formally sticks to the same plotline, yet resolves it very differently. Instead of inheritance and continuity, Boratynsky's poem emphasizes the discord and discrepancy between the two poets. Boratynsky's omits the figure of an "heir in the crowd," who becomes a metaphoric prototype for the modern poet in Batiushkov's text. Instead, Boratynsky creates an amalgamated image of a "classical poet," simultaneously both Roman and Greek: "Когда на греческий амвон, | Когда на римскую трибуну, | Оратор восходил..." ("When onto the Greek pulpit, | When onto the Roman platform | An orator ascended"). Boratynsky also dispenses with the implied nobility of the speaker—if Batiushkov's Thucydides is a "Надежда крови благородной" [hope of the noble blood], Boratynsky hints at the democratic connections of his Greek/Roman poet: "и славословил он, | Или оплакивал народную фортуна" [And he

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<sup>62</sup>This episode from the *Life of Thucydides* by Marcellinus was taken from "Эмилиевы письма" ("Emilius's Letters," 1815) by Mikhail Muraviev. See N. V. Fridman, "Primechaniia" in Konstantin Batiushkov, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii*, Moscow-Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel, 1964, 316.

glorified, [Or lamented the fate of the people]. This might be the reason why these lines were cut out by the censors and first appeared only in 1869<sup>63</sup>.

As we see, Boratynsky invites the reader to think about the poem in terms of poetic inheritance and succession but actually talks about the very opposite: the painfully experienced lack of the reader/recipient, which curtails poetic utterance. What is really at stake here is the question of aesthetic judgment. This judgment is becoming impossible due to the lack of audience. The value of the poet and his verse in antiquity was primarily “performative”—the reaction of the audience confirmed the status of the poet and encoded his identity. The modern poet is denied the luxury of performing and thus is denied the “use value” of his work—which has, apparently, no use in the modern world. He is no longer able to ascertain the value of his product and his talent, no longer able to construct his poetic identity as “a producer,” since both the value of his product and also the nature of the product itself are now obscure.

The uncanny portion of the poem comes closer to the end. Exposing the insecurities and anxieties of the modern poet, the poem suddenly encounters rhyme as a powerful modern response to this solitude of a Romantic poet. Rhyme is revealed as a self-gratification mechanism or some kind of inner dialogue. This dialogue acknowledges, confirms, and effectively recognizes the modern poet:

Среди безжизненного сна  
Средь гробового хлада света  
Своею ласкою поэта

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<sup>63</sup> E. Kupreianova and I. Medvedeva, “Kommentarii k stikhotvoreniiam,” in Evgenii Baratynskii, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii v dvukh tomakh*, Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1936, 276.

Ты, рифма! радуешь одна.  
 Подобно голубю ковчега  
 Одна ему, с родного берега  
 Живую ветвь приносишь ты;  
 Одна с божественным порывом  
 Миришь его твоим отзывом  
 И признаешь его мечты.

(Among the lifeless slumber | Among the tomb-coldness of the society | With your caresses | You, rhyme, are the only one to inspire a poet. | Like Noah's dove | You are the only one, from the native shore | To bring him a living branch; | You are the only one to reconcile him | With the divine rush by your recall | And to acknowledge his dreams).

These concluding lines are particularly striking as they not merely give agency to rhyme in a trope of apostrophe but actually “act out” rhyme’s performance. Rhyme can’t but “acknowledge dreams” because “dreams” (“мечты”) rhyme with “you bring” (“приносишь ты”). Such animation of prosodic structure empowers the poet. The image of rhyme is also clearly eroticized: it (or she in Russian) caresses him, “she” is the only one to please and understand him. But the agency given to rhyme is immediately taken away at the very moment of rhyming: this feminine figure is “forced” to acknowledge poet’s dreams, even though she seems to be doing so out of free will: the last rhyme, “мечТЫ”—”приносишь ТЫ” effectively equates the apostrophized image of Rhyme, addressed as “ТЫ,” with the actual prosodic rhyme of the poem. Strangely, rhyme becomes here a kind of a companion and almost an audience for this poem, as she seems to be rhyming “herself” with the poet’s dreams.

For a poem that problematizes and dramatizes the prosodic figure of Rhyme to such an extent, its actual rhyming and rhythmic structures are surprisingly straightforward. The poem is written in iambic tetrameter, with occasional shifts to iambic hexameter in lines 2–5, 11, 16–18, and 19, where the cadence of classical verse is obviously imitated. The poem tends to choose

enclosed rhyme. It only switches to an ABAB scheme in lines 14–18 (which conjoin Greek and Roman poets, as each ascends respectively the Greek pulpit and the Roman tribune), and it infrequently allows AABCCB (the final lines of the poem, which apostrophize the figure of the Rhyme). The ABBA scheme emphasizes anticipation and the wait for a prosodic response, which is delayed by two intermediate lines. The poem often employs this to greater effect by revealing in the fourth line of a quatrain something thematically significant—such as, for example, in the last line of the poem, where “мечты” are eventually acknowledged only after a deliberate prosodic pause.

This last word of the poem, “мечты” (“dreams”), brings about a wide variety of elegiac connotations in Russian poetic tradition. Among them, Batiushkov’s famous long elegy of the same name, “Мечта”<sup>64</sup> (“A Dream,” 1817) is perhaps the most important for this discussion. That elegy is structurally similar to Boratynsky’s “Рифма”—it is organized as an extended apostrophe to a Dream. This Dream is an obviously female figure who becomes the poet’s guide in the world of elegiac imagination. It “legitimizes” the poet’s rambling through mythic/heroic past, transcribing the poet’s dreaming as a sequence of erotic encounters. The poet first visits the heroic north of Scandinavian sagas, where he observes a heavenly orgy in the wake of a victorious battle. There the poet identifies with the northern bard who, as it appears, dreams together with him. Later the poet peeps into some unnamed lovers’ bedroom, where the Dream transforms herself into the beloved (“На ложе роскоши с подругой боязливой, | Ей шепчешь о любви и пламенной рукой | Снимаешь со груди ее покров стыдливый, | Теперь

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<sup>64</sup>Konstantin Batiushkov. *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii*. Moscow-Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel, 1964, 223-229.

блаженствуешь и счастлив ты—Мечтой,” “On the bed of luxury you are with your timid friend, | You whisper to her about love and with your ardent hand, | You take off the modest cover off her breasts, | And now you are blissful and happy – with a Dream!”). In the end, the poet finally joins Horace as the latter is meeting his lover Glycera—she, of course, is also referred to as a “Dream.” All in all, this evasive and volatile “Dream” figure in Batiushkov’s poem is structurally very similar to Boratynsky’s “Рифма”: it acknowledges his status as a Romantic poet, inducts him into the poetic canon, and reinforces his masculine identity by a series of dazzling erotic conquests which he half observes and half participates in.

As it appears, Boratynsky replays two classical elegiac plots and weaves them together in a way that produces a very different meaning. He explicitly evokes a plot of elegiac inheritance, but in his version the inability to follow in the steps of a classical genius defines the condition of the modern poet. He also presents us with a Muse-like erotic figure who becomes the salvation of the modern poet. But unlike more Romantic interpretations of the Muse, which employ the Muse’s feminine appeal and present her as a young nymph,<sup>65</sup> this anthropomorphic Muse imagery works to confirm and reinforce the masculine integrity of the elegist, endangered by the very genre of elegy, which allows male authors to indulge in a behavior marked as feminine by patriarchal society. Boratynsky’s poem undoes this “legitimizing” function of the

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<sup>65</sup> See Batiushkov's “Ответ Тургеневу” (“Response to Turgenev,” 1812(?): Там Душеньки певец/Любимец нежной музыки/И пламенных сердец/ Любил, вздыхал всечасно...” Ibid., 144-145. Also: Zhukovsky's “Вечер” (“Evening,” 1806), “Я музу юную бывало..” (“I used to [meet] the young Muse,” 1819), in Vasilii Zhukovsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v dvenadtsati tomakh*, Moscow: Iazyki russkoi kul'tury, 1999-2000, vol. 1, 75-78, vol. 2, 235.

Muse and turns her into a figure of poetic discourse not quite separate from the poet himself.<sup>66</sup> If for Batiushkov the Muse necessary for maintaining and controlling the identity and integrity of the elegiac poet, Boratynsky's poem insists on the performative, simulated, imagined integrity conferred by the "prosodic Muse."

Boratynsky was not the only one to apostrophize and thematize rhyme in his poetry. It makes sense to consider his interpretation of rhyme in the context of other poetic animations of it. Three of Pushkin's poems fit particularly well in this discussion: "Рифма, звучная подруга"<sup>67</sup> ("Rhyme, my sonorous friend," 1828), never published during his lifetime and therefore probably not known to Boratynsky), "Рифма"<sup>68</sup> ("Rhyme," 1830), which retells the same story as the previous one but in different format, and finally "Эхо"<sup>69</sup> ("Echo," 1831), Pushkin's famous exercise in alliteration, which is thematically very similar to his second "Рифма."

The first poem, "Рифма, звучная подруга," is structured very much like the concluding lines of Boratynsky's poem. It is an apostrophe to Rhyme, who used to be the poet's friend, companion, and lover but no longer is: "Рифма, звучная подруга <...> Ты умокла, онемела | Ах, ужель ты улетела, Изменила навсегда!" [Rhyme, my sonorous friend, | You became silent, you became mute, | Oh, is it that you flew away, | Deserted me forever]. The poem proceeds to give an account of their relationship. Rhyme plays a recognizable role of the teasing,

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<sup>66</sup>Similarly, Lotman identifies the Muse in Pushkin's works as an image at the meta-textual level, a representation of the creation of the poetic text, a synonym of poetry itself and the personification of poetic evolution. Yuri Lotman, *Pushkin. Biografiia pisatel'ia. Stat'i i zametki. 1960-1990*, St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 1995, 47, 97.

<sup>67</sup>Alexander Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, eds. Maxim Gorky, S. M. Bondi et al., vol. 3, Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1948, reprint Moscow: Voskresen'e, 1995, 120.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid, 240

<sup>69</sup>Ibid, 276



volatile, playful, and evasive beloved, and the poet is an obedient and complacent lover readily accepting Rhyme's antics:

Ты, бывало, мне внимала  
За мечтой моей бежала,  
Как послушная дитя;  
То, свободна и ревнива,  
Своенравна и ленива,  
С нею спорил я шутя.  
(You used to listen to me, | You ran after my dream | Like an obedient child; | Or,  
independent and jealous, | Wanton and indolent | - I argued with her jokingly).

Even the grammar here is slightly “off,” further emphasizing the casualness and wantonness of this very mobile (as it is often the case in Pushkin's lyrics) affair. This erotic mobility contrasts with the much more dramatic, intense, and altogether “serious” relationship that Boratynsky describes in his poem. While Rhyme does appear to be a kind of Muse-like figure in Pushkin's “Рифма,” her departure is just mentioned and not dwelt on or explained. Instead, in the last three stanzas, Pushkin ventures to recount Rhyme's supposed ancestry. He presents her as a pseudo-mythical figure in the Greek pantheon. Her father is Apollo, and, as the poem speculates, once Apollo was expelled from Olympus by Zeus, he encountered and fell in love with Mnemosyne while shepherding for Admetus—of which union Rhyme was born.

Metaphorically, this poem recounts two situations that characterize the development of Russian (as well as any other Western) poetic tradition: acquiring rhyme and parting with it. Pushkin refuses to essentialize Rhyme and define it as an inalienable, integral, formative structure of verse—something that many later Russian poets often do. Instead, he portrays his own affair with Rhyme as pleasing and disporting, but nothing more. He reverses the

“chronological” order of events, starting with Rhyme’s departure and concluding with her birth. This does not even allow us to read the poem as a narrative of loss (which would have paused and dwelt on the experience of lack). In a way, Pushkin’s take on Rhyme seems pre-modern rather than modern. Pushkin almost deliberately professes his lack of anxieties regarding rhyme in a time where publicly displaying them would likely be interpreted as a sign of being a modern, Romantic poet.

His later poem, also titled “Рифма,” which he actually did publish in 1832 in “Severnye tsvety”, presents us with a very similar pseudo-mythical account of Rhyme’s birth, but slightly changes the details. Now it is Echo, a restless nymph, who is seduced by Apollo and gives birth to Rhyme, who is later raised by Mnemosyne. In this version Pushkin omits his own involvement with Rhyme and adopts instead a panoptic, pseudo-epic perspective suggested by his switch to unrhymed, Alexandrine verse. This poem does not juxtapose Rhyme’s departure with Rhyme’s birth but presents Rhyme as a timeless, eternal being whose origin dates back to prehistory. Rhyme’s connection with memory is also emphasized: she is, like her mother, Echo, “памяти строгой послушна” [obedient to strict memory]. This line implicitly gestures toward the idea that the original function of Rhyme was mnemonic, that Rhyme is a natural ruse for memorizing long chunks of text.<sup>70</sup> All in all, this poem presents us with a much more conventional image of

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<sup>70</sup> Remarkably, this notion is at the basis of the chapter “Mnemonic Lines: The Social Uses of Memorized Poetry” in Mikhail Gronas’s book *Cognitive Poetics and Cultural Memory: Russian Literary Mnemonics*, New York: Routledge, 2011, 71-96. Gronas takes the idea of the mnemonic function of rhyme at face value and goes so far as to claim that the transformation of verse from syllabo-tonic to *vers libre* in the nineteenth and twentieth century was determined by the need to memorize. However, both Pushkin in his playful image and Gronas—a poet himself—in his theory seem to overlook the mnemonic role of other prosodic elements of verse, such as meter and rhythm in ancient classical poetry, as Milman Parry demonstrated (*The Making of Homeric Verse: The Collected Papers of Milman Parry*, ed. Adam Parry, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971) and Albert Lord (*The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960). See also Francis A. Yates’s approach in *The Art of Memory*,

Rhyme, whose role and function is firmly defined, whose place in the poetic pantheon is securely established, and who no longer is allowed to whimsically fly away and jilt the poet.

This conventionality is further enhanced in Pushkin's later poem "Эхо," which is thematically very close to the second "Рифма." This poem may be read as an exercise in alliteration. It presents the figure of Echo, who is answering to every call of nature and yet herself remains unanswered. Echo's answers are, of course, sonic repetitions, alliterations, but also rhymes: "На всякий звУК | Свой отклик в воздухе пустом | Родишь ты вдрУГ" [To any sound | In the empty air your response | You suddenly deliver]. "Any sound" is suddenly answered by a rhyme here. In the last line of the poem the work of echo is compared to the work of the poet, which was probably the intention of the poem all along. Thus this text essentializes sonic repetition as the genuine mechanism of poetry. The poet himself becomes a kind of "meta-responder" in the last lines of the poem: "И шлешь ответ; | Тебе ж нет отзыва... Таков | И ты, поэт!" (And you send your response; You yourself are not answered ... And neither | Are you, poet!). By rhyming "ответ" with "поэт," the poem implies that the poet might be the only one to respond to Echo herself.

At any rate, this poem, written only three years after Pushkin's first "Рифма," presents a very different perspective on Rhyme and sound repetition in poetry. From fulfilling some kind of decorative function in Pushkin's 1828 poem, Rhyme became an essential and timeless element of poetic discourse in his 1830 poem and was further reinterpreted as the defining feature of poetry

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where she speaks about the importance of the "intense visual memorization" (Francis Yates, *The Art of Memory*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, 4).

in his last poem of this “cycle,” “Эхо.” Pushkin clearly here moves in the direction of essentializing rhyme and rhyming. But he does not go as far as Boratynsky. In Pushkin’s poems, rhyme eventually becomes a formative but atemporal element of poetry. In Boratynsky, the discovery and the novelty of rhyme makes it an essentially modern phenomenon. This novelty and modernity determines the role of rhyme in Boratynsky’s poetics.

All in all, Boratynsky essentially adapts classical elegiac tropes (that is, tropes of apostrophe and poetic inheritance) to represent the growing anxiety over the poet’s role and status in a world where his relationship with the reader is mediated by the market. This perceived separation from the reader is integral to the kind of poetic identity Boratynsky is constructing. This identity is organized around various compensatory tactics, which are meant to replace the lost harmony and purity of poetic production. Rhyme, a mere formal prosodic feature of poetic speech, is reinterpreted as a compensatory mechanism that restores the integrity of the discourse. If we remember that the prosodic function of the rhyme (understood here as establishing positional equivalences of the sonic elements in poetic discourse) is to “stitch” a poem together, make it be recognized as a poem, then this work of “constructing” a poem becomes (or, better said, is made to become) equivalent with a very similar kind of work: that of constructing or restoring the poet’s own identity and integrity. Both the poem’s integrity and the poet’s integrity are asserted through repetition. Rhyme repeats the sounds at the end of the lines, but it also “repeats” and thus acknowledges the poet’s dreams, acknowledges him as a poet. While *Dream* in Batiushkov’s poem seems to be performing a similar function, it constructs the poet’s identity against the background of poetic canon and tradition, referring to a more conventional plot, something more along the lines of, say, “tradition vs. individual talent.” Batiushkov’s *Dream*

helps him to inscribe himself into an already exiting tradition, the anxiety of belonging to which is overcome by the overtly erotic tone of the narrative. This tone allows the poet to bond with Horace and with the northern bards and thus makes him feel at home among the ranks of the sanctified.

Boratynsky's "Рифма" is very different: it employs a primarily modernist ruse of attempting to enter the tradition by pretending to reject it in a trope of failed elegiac succession. More so, his "Рифма" is introduced as an essentially modern response to a new kind of anxiety, the anxiety of separation from the recipient, from the reader. Rather than bonding and sharing his Muse with the glorified poets of the past, Boratynsky's poem intimates the uniqueness, singularity, and distinctive character of Rhyme, whose performance of identity and integrity answers to their perceived lack of.

## Chapter 2: Poetry Commodified. Nekrasov and Severianin

### Nekrasov

The coming of age of the Russian novel in the 1840s<sup>71</sup> was a time when poetry began to cede ground to prose on the literary market. While the elder generation of elegiac poets, such as Zhukovsky, Rostopchina, Pavlova, and Boratynsky, continued to publish their work, the reaction of critics and the reading public was often wary, not to say altogether disparaging. Belinsky's response to Boratynsky's "Сумерки" ("Twilight") is quite characteristic of the new developments in Russian literature of the time.<sup>72</sup> Belinsky accuses Boratynsky of being a kind of "false" poet for whom feelings suffice—which is simply not good enough anymore.<sup>73</sup> It was not long afterwards, in 1861, that Dostoevsky published his "Г-н Бов и вопрос об искусстве," ("Mr. Bov and the question of art"), famously trashing Fet's most famous poem "Шепот, робкое дыхание" ("Whispers, timid breathing," 1850).<sup>74</sup> The days when elegy was one of the most

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<sup>71</sup> M. Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time* was published in 1840; the first part of Gogol's *Dead Souls* was published in 1842; Dostoevsky's *Poor Folk* was published in 1846.

<sup>72</sup> V. G. Belinsky, "Stikhotvoreniia E. Baratynskogo," in V. G. Belinsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6, Moscow, 1935, 456-488.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 488

<sup>74</sup> Dostoevsky wrote: "Положим, что мы переносимся в восемнадцатое столетие, именно в день лиссабонского землетрясения. Половина жителей в Лиссабоне погибает; дома разваливаются и проваливаются; имущество гибнет; всякий из оставшихся в живых что-нибудь потерял - или имен или семьк Жители толкаются по улицам в отчаянии, пораженные обезумевшие от ужаса. В Лиссабоне живет в это время какой-нибудь известный португальский поэт. На другой день утром выходит номера лиссабонского "Меркурия" (тогда все

dominant genres (if not *the* most dominant genre) in Russian literature were thus “officially” over.

With the viability of poetic utterance being repeatedly doubted, and prose (and, in particular, the novel) rapidly gaining momentum, the literary biography of perhaps the most, if not the only truly successful poet of this period, Nikolai Nekrasov, is quite fascinating. Indeed, for a contemporary reader Nekrasov’s legacy might be somewhat tarnished by his eminent role in the Soviet pantheon of precursors of Socialist realism.<sup>75</sup> Yet as Mikhail Makeev insists in his recent monograph,<sup>76</sup> it was Nekrasov’s ambition to make it economically as a Russian poet that distinguished his literary career. It was Nekrasov’s success with his readers that made him stand out, but also somewhat compromised the indulgently sentimental agenda of his verse. At the same time as he was expounding on his sympathies for “the insulted and injured,” he was

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издавалось в "Меркурии"). Номер журнала появившегося в такую минуту, возбуждает даже некоторое любопытство в несчастных лиссабонцах, несмотря на то, что им в эту минуту не журналов; надеются, что номер вышел нарочно, чтоб дать некоторые сведения, сообщить некоторые известия о погибших, о пропавших без вести и проч. и проч. И вдруг - на самом видном месте листа бросается всем в глаза что-нибудь вроде следующего <...> Не знаю наверное, как приняли бы свой «Меркурий» лиссабонцы, но мне кажется, они тут же казнили бы всенародно, на площади, своего знаменитого поэта, и вовсе не за то, что он написал стихотворение без глагола, а потому что вместо трелей соловья накануне под землей слышались такие трели...” [Suppose we are transported to the eighteenth century, that is to the day of Lisbon earthquake. Half the citizens in Lisbon dies, houses fall through and apart, the property perishes, every survivor has lost something—an estate, or a family. The citizens are jostling in the streets in despair, struck, driven mad by terror. In Lisbon of that time there lives some famous Portuguese poet. On the next day a new issue of Lisbon’s *Mercury* (everything was published in *Mercury* back then) comes out. While nobody cares for journals at that time, some curiosity is aroused by the issue. People hope that they may read news, reports on the dead, lost, etc. And then, in the most conspicuous place one reads something like this <...> I don’t know how Lisbon citizens would have reacted to this, but I think that they might have executed their famous poet summarily, in public, in the square. They would have done not because he had written a poem without a single verb, but because in lieu of nightingale’s warbles they had heard such warbles from under the earth]. F. M. Dostoevskii, “G-n Bov i vopros ob iskusstve,” in F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh*, vol. 13, Leningrad: Nauka, 1978, 75-76.

<sup>75</sup> See, for example, N. L. Stepanov, *Nekrasov i sovetskaia poezia*, Moscow: Nauka, 1966.

<sup>76</sup> Mikhail Makeev, *Nikolai Nekrasov: poet i predprinimatel. Ocherki o vzaimosviasi literatury i ekonomiki*, Moscow: Max Press, 2009.

pocketing the considerable revenue that, quite often, those very same “insulted and injured” were paying him for his poetry.

Nekrasov’s choice of a career in poetry was dictated primarily by his financial circumstances. Born into a noble but rather poor family, he arrived in Saint Petersburg in the hopes of making a fortune and becoming famous.<sup>77</sup> As we know from his own autobiographical sketches as well as from the letters he wrote, he thought the career of a poet to be a perfect road to prosperity and fame. Nekrasov was very much interested in the economic aspect of writing poetry, just like the protagonist of his early short story “Безвести пропавший пиита” (“A poet who disappeared without a trace,” 1840), who exclaims:

Да, я хотел было поступить в земский суд, да наш уездный учитель, умнейший человек на свете, посоветовал мне поступить лучше в пииты; оно, говорит, и доходно и почетно.

[Yes, I thought of joining the local court, but our parish teacher, a most intelligent man in the world, suggested that I should rather become a poet; he says, it’s both lucrative and honorable.]<sup>78</sup>

Indeed, Nekrasov himself was just as motivated to earn his living by writing poetry as the protagonist of that story. In a letter to F. A. Koni (November 25, 1841) Nekrasov notes:

Потеряв надежду на постоянную работу, я тороплюсь наготовить разных произведений, которые можно было бы продать поштучно для выручки денег на содержание своей особы.

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<sup>77</sup> V. Evgeniev-Maximov, *Zhizn i deiatel'nost Nekrasova*, vol. 1, Moscow, Leningrad: 1947, 155-166.

<sup>78</sup> N. N. Nekrasov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 7, Leningrad: 1981, 48.



[Having lost the hope of finding a permanent job, I am in a hurry to prepare various texts which I would be able to sell by the piece to earn money to sustain my persona.]<sup>79</sup>

While Nekrasov's later biographers would attempt to play down the commercial orientation of Nekrasov's literary career,<sup>80</sup> his early biographer A. Golubev seems quite unequivocal in evaluating true motives behind Nekrasov's writing practices:

В 1840 году он даже выпустил в свет собрание первых своих мелких стихотворений, под названием «Мечты и звуки» с подписью начальных букв имени и фамилии. Издание это было предпринято с единственной целью приобрести денег. Таким образом, самые первые проявления своего таланта Некрасову пришлось эксплуатировать на приобретение необходимых средств к существованию.

[In 1840 he even published the first collection of his short poems, under the title of "Dreams and Sounds," signed only by his initials. The publication was undertaken with the singular goal of earning money. Thus, Nekrasov was forced to employ the very first signs of his talent to acquire the necessary means for his existence.]<sup>81</sup>

Naturally, one does not think of poetry as the most lucrative career path. Especially in the light of the aforementioned decline in public interest in the elegiac genre, Nekrasov's decision to become a professional poet might appear rather careless. But as Makeev persuasively shows in his monograph, Nekrasov's decision to become a professional poet was anything but careless.

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<sup>79</sup> In V. Evgeniev-Maximov, *Zhizn i deiatel'nost' Nekrasova*, vol. 1, Moscow, Leningrad: 1947, 242.

<sup>80</sup> N. L. Stepanov, *Nekrasov i sovetskaia poezia*, Moscow: Nauka, 1966, 168.

<sup>81</sup> A. Golubev, *Nikolai Aleksandrovich Nekrasov, Biografiia, kriticheskii obzor poezii*, St. Petersburg, 1878, 9. Quoted in Mikhail Makeev, *Nikolai Nekrasov: poet i predprinimatel. Ocherki o vzaimosviasi literatury i ekonomiki*, Moscow: Max Press, 2009, 17.

Nekrasov gave a lot of thought to making poetry profitable. As it turned out for Nekrasov, most of his stratagems worked really well.

To begin with, Nekrasov was well aware of poetry's handicap on the market, noting in 1849 in a brief essay "Русские второстепенные поэты"<sup>82</sup> ("Russia's secondary poets") that prose is naturally more in demand due to its more immediate connection with the everyday life of the readers. And yet poets should not despair, since the universality of the genre allows for the possibility of a much wider audience.<sup>83</sup> One way to reach that wider audience would be to publish one's poems in stand-alone editions, as opposed to publishing them in literary periodicals. Makeev notes:

Индивидуальный поэтический сборник, по мнению Некрасова, выгодно отличается от журнала во многих отношениях. Здесь полностью все зависит от самого автора. В своем собственном сборнике поэт не может позаимствовать ничью репутацию, воспользоваться чужим кредитом. Он сам вступает в борьбу за имя, славу и деньги. [A stand-alone collection of poetry, in Nekrasov's opinion, surpasses magazine publication in many ways. Here, everything depends on the author. In his own collection the poet does not borrow anyone's reputation, does not rely on anyone's credit. He himself is fighting for his name, glory, and money].<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> N. N. Nekrasov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 11, no. 2, Leningrad: 1981, 29-44. Nekrasov, for example, notes that, "Теперь эпоха положительная. Каждый литератор естественно хочет извлечь наибольшую выгоду из своего таланта, а при всеобщем равнодушии к стихам <...> конечно, проза представляет более удобств в этом отношении." [Now we live in a positive epoch. Each writer naturally wants to profit as much as he can from his talent, and due to the universal indifference to verse <...> prose is certainly offering greater benefits in that regard]. Ibid., 33.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>84</sup> Mikhail Makeev, *Nikolai Nekrasov: poet i predprinimatel. Ocherki o vzaimosviasi literatury i ekonomiki*, Moscow: Max Press, 2009, 126.

This strategy worked well for Nekrasov. The print runs of his collections were unprecedented and record-setting for years to come. His 1856 “Стихотворения Н. Некрасова” (“Poems by N. Nekrasov”) was particularly impressive: it sold all three thousand copies of its print run in just a few days, even though its price was rather high—one ruble fifty kopecks per copy.<sup>85</sup>

Nekrasov took other steps to promote his poetry as well. For instance, he arranged his long poem “Коробейники”<sup>86</sup> (“Peddlers,” 1861) to be published in a special very cheap edition.<sup>87</sup> Thus, Nekrasov planned on entering the market for *lubok* literature. This was quite a far-sighted decision, anticipating the boom in *lubok* publishing that began in the 1880s.<sup>88</sup> As a smart businessman venturing onto a new market, Nekrasov chose to forego the profits and distributed the revenue (each copy was priced at only three kopecks to make it affordable for the peasant audience) between the dealer (I. A. Golyshev, who dealt in icons and *lubok* literature<sup>89</sup> and received one kopeck from each sale), and the *ofeni*, the travelling salesmen, who received the remaining two kopecks. Nekrasov published the book at his own expense and hoped to

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<sup>85</sup> N. S. Ashukin, *Letopis zhizni i tvorchestva N. A. Nekrasova*, Moscow: Academia, 1935, 160.

<sup>86</sup> N. A. Nekrasov, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 1, Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel, 1967, 115-118.

<sup>87</sup> Mikhail Makeev, *Nikolai Nekrasov: poet i predprinimatel. Ocherki o vzaimosviasi literatury i ekonomiki*, Moscow: Max Press, 2009, 214.

<sup>88</sup> Jeffrey Brooks, “Readers and Reading at the End of the Tsarist Era” in William Mills Todd III, ed., *Literature and Society in Imperial Russia, 1800–1914*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978, 122.

<sup>89</sup> Mikhail Makeev, *Nikolai Nekrasov: poet i predprinimatel. Ocherki o vzaimosviasi literatury i ekonomiki*, Moscow: Max Press, 2009, 217.

establish his presence on the new market; yet the time for mass literature had not yet come, and his experiment did not have any further developments.

Makeev makes a very strong point highlighting the pecuniary aspect of Nekrasov's literary trajectory. He argues that, for Nekrasov, the economic viability of a work of art equals its aesthetic value: the better something sells, the better it must be. The best authors are those who sell the most copies, at the highest price.<sup>90</sup> Of course, from our vantage point such naïve economic determinism appears rather one-sided. Remembering Bourdieu and his discussion of the varying degrees of autonomy in the literary field,<sup>91</sup> one can say that Nekrasov was all too eager to give up any claims to autonomy within the field of cultural production. He was ready to become a professional man of letters even before the publishing boom of the 1860s finally transformed the Russian literary market into a fully-fledged literary field. If the degree of an agent's autonomy within the field is measured by the willingness to exchange cultural capital for economic capital, Nekrasov can be said to internalize and adopt the rules of the game even before they were fully formulated.

This unprecedented and unusual bias in Nekrasov's literary stance translates into a very eclectic, convoluted kind of poetics. Much has been said about the prosaic elements in

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<sup>90</sup> “Это почти идеальный рынок, на котором роль единственного критерия успеха предпринимателя (или писателя) играют деньги, вырученные за товар, полученная им прибыль. Деньги же являются и единственным критерием читательской оценки книги.” (“This is an almost ideal market, where the revenue from selling goods is the only measure of success either for a businessman or writer. Money is also the only criterion in the reader's opinion of the book”). Mikhail Makeev, *Nikolai Nekrasov: poet i predprinimatel. Ocherki o vzaimosviasi literatury i ekonomiki*, Moscow: Max Press, 2009, 217.

<sup>91</sup> See Introduction.

Nekrasov's poetry.<sup>92</sup> Naturally, Nekrasov's "prosaisms" bridge the gap between poetry and prose, allowing for a potentially much wider audience for his verse. Yet what I find much more fascinating (but also, less researched) is Nekrasov's adaptation of the elegiac mode of discourse. Consider his poem "Застенчивость" ("Shyness," 1855):

Ах ты, страсть роковая, бесплодная,  
Отвяжись, не тумань головы!  
Осмеет нас красавица модная,  
Вкруг нее увиваются львы:

Поступь гордая, голос уверенный,  
Что ни скажут - их речь хороша,  
А вот я-то войду как потерянный -  
И ударится в пятки душа!

На ногах словно гири железные,  
Как свинцом налита голова,  
Странно руки торчат бесполезные,  
На губах замирают слова.

Улыбнусь - непроворная, жесткая,  
Не в улыбку улыбка моя,  
Пошутить захочу - шутка плоская:  
Покраснею мучительно я!

Помещусь, молчаливо досадуя,  
В дальний угол... уныло смотрю  
И сижу неподвижен, как статуя,  
И судьбу потихоньку корю:

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<sup>92</sup> "Некрасов смело ввел в поэзию методы и принципы прозаического повествования. <...> Перенесение прозаических принципов в поэзию сказалось и в сюжетности стихов и поэм Некрасова, и в лепке характеров, и во включении в стих прозаических интонаций и лексики. <...> Прозаизация стиха у Некрасова отнюдь не упрощение и отказ от специфически стиховой выразительности, но новый принцип видения мира, осознание его в новых соотношениях." [Nekrasov bravely introduced methods and principles of prose narratives into poetry, <...> the introduction of prose principles was reflected both in the plot structure of Nekrasov's poems and in the molding of his characters, in the prose intonations and lexicon in his verse]. N. L. Stepanov, *Nekrasov i sovetskaia poezia*, Moscow: Nauka, 1966, 46-47.

"Для чего-де меня, горемычного,  
Дураком ты на свет создала?  
Ни умишка, ни виду приличного,  
Ни довольства собой не дала?.."

Ах! судьба ль меня, полно, обидела?  
Отчего ж, как домой ворочусь  
(Удивилась бы, если б увидела),  
И умен и пригож становлюсь?

Всё припомню, что было ей сказано,  
Вижу: сам бы сказал не глупей...  
Нет! мне в божьих дарах не отказано,  
И лицом я не хуже людей!

Малодушье пустое и детское,  
Не хочу тебя знать с этих пор!  
Я пойду в ее общество светское,  
Я там буду умен и остер!

Пусть поймет, что свободно и молодо  
В этом сердце волнуется кровь,  
Что под маской наружного холода  
Бесконечная скрыта любовь...

Полно роль-то играть сумасшедшего,  
В сердце искру надежды беречь!  
Не стряхнуть рокового прошедшего  
Мне с моих невыносимых плеч!

Придавила меня бедность грозная,  
Запугал меня с детства отец,  
Бесталанная долюшка слезная  
Извела, доконала вконец!

Знаю я: сожаленье постыдное,  
Что как червь копошится в груди,  
Да сознание бессилья обидное  
Мне осталось одно впереди...<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> N. A. Nekrasov, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii v trekh tomakh*, ed. K. I. Chukovskii, vol. 1, Leningrad: 1967, 159-160.

[Oh, you fatal, fruitless passion,  
Leave me alone, do not cloud my head!  
The fashionable beauty will ridicule us,  
“Lions” are chasing after her.

Their gait is proud, the voice is confident,  
Whatever they say, their speech is smart.  
And when I enter, I am lost,  
My soul hides in my heels.

I feel like I have iron weights on my feet,  
And my head is filled with lead,  
My useless hands are sticking out weirdly,  
Words are freezing on my lips

If I smile, my smile is clumsy and stiff,  
It does not come off as a smile,  
If I want to make a joke, it's flat  
And I blush painfully!

I would place myself, silently grieving,  
In the far corner ... I look gloomily  
And I sit still as a statue  
And I silently accuse my fate.

"Why have you brought me into this world  
A wretch as I am, a fool?  
Why have you given me neither wits, nor looks,  
Nor peace of mind?

Did the fate mistreat me?  
Why then, when I come back home,  
(She would have been surprised had she seen)  
I become handsome and smart?

I remember all that was said to her,  
I see: I could have also said it just as smartly.  
But no, I am not deprived of God's gifts,  
And my face is not worse than others'.

The cowardice is empty and childish,  
I do not want to know you any more!

I will go to her genteel society,  
I'll be there clever and witty!

She should understand that the blood surges  
Freely and youthfully in my heart.  
That under the mask of external coldness  
Infinite love is concealed.

Enough of playing a madman's part,  
And cherish the spark of hope in the heart.  
It is not possible to shake the fateful past  
From my enervated shoulders.

Terrible poverty has pressed me down,  
The father made me fearful since childhood,  
My mediocre, tearful lot,  
Has exhausted and finished me altogether.

I know: this shameful compassion  
Which like a worm is stirring in my chest,  
And the vexing awareness of my impotence  
I only have one thing ahead of me]<sup>94</sup>

The poem speaks about the protagonist's longing for an inaccessible object of desire, a woman who is far removed from the poet's sphere by class and money. As such, the poem starts with the most rudimentary elegiac topos (desiring the unreachable), but then deviates from the elegiac plot and setting in many important ways. Most notably, the poet laments not so much the inaccessibility of the object of his desire as his impotence in speaking about his longing. While other suitors are very comfortable in their roles, the poet is overcome with shyness ('застенчивость,' literally—behind-the-wall-ness), which arrests his discursive powers. In a

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<sup>94</sup> My translation.



ruse reminiscent of Tiutchev's "Silentium" (1830s), Nekrasov's poem speaks about the impossibility of speaking. If this is an elegy, then what is lost, unavailable, and mourned is not a person, but the protagonist's very ability to speak in the elegiac mode, to write elegies.

The elegiac vocabulary of the first stanza ("страсть роковая, бесплодная," "a fateful, fruitless passion") is strangely contrasted with the plural which is used to refer to the poet: "осмеет нас" [will laugh at us]. The inclusive "us" implies that the poet is not alone in being a castaway, that his readers may join him in his lamentations. "Модная красавица" [the fashionable beauty] is an easily recognizable poetic formula of the 1830s,<sup>95</sup> but here she is interacting not with the poet alone, but with "us," who are thus invited to share the poet's predicament. Sexual frustration—a common subject of elegiac verse—is invested here with a different meaning. It is the communality of shared frustration which is the collateral outcome of such grammatical juggling. It is "our" inability to write elegies, to engage in an elegiac mode of discourse which both separates us from the fashionable beauty, but also brings us together.

The poet reverts to a first person narrative in the second stanza, but violates the elegiac code in other ways. Rather than speaking about the object of his desire and rendering its loss or inaccessibility in figurative terms, as would be expected in an elegy, the poet mostly talks about himself and his shortcomings as a suitor. It almost feels as if the situation of sexual frustration is just a convenient opportunity to dwell on the poet's inadequacies, and in his narcissistic self-flagellation he actually forgets about the fashionable beauty. When he comes back to her,

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<sup>95</sup> Cf. Onegin's definition as "красавиц модных модный враг," in A. S. Pushkin, "Otryvki iz puteshestviia Onegina," A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochineni v shestnadsati tomakh*, vol. 6, Moscow, Leningrad: 1937, 135.

determined to overcome his shyness, he does not seek her as much as the genteel society of which she is a part: “Я пойду в ее общество светское, Я там буду умен и остер.”

The disintegration of the elegiac is strangely reflected on the prosodic level as well. While the poem is written in anapestic trimeter, the metric structure of the poem stumbles upon the word “бедность” [poverty], when the poet finally divulges the reason for his misfortunes and the real source of all his troubles: “Придавила меня бедность грозная” [Terrible poverty crushed me down]. Thus, social circumstances are blamed for the breakdown of the elegiac genre: just as poverty crushes down the poet, so does it also violently disrupt the prosodic flow of the poem. As we saw in the first chapter, Pushkin thematized class identity as a necessary precondition of the elegiac mode of speaking. This poem of Nekrasov’s seems to be going in the opposite direction, inverting the rules of engagement. It is not that the security of class boundaries enables the elegiac mode, but that the elegiac mode is made obsolete by the social circumstances of the poet who tries but is unable to follow the code.

Nekrasov’s experiments proved rather short-lived, as prose narratives dominated the Russian literary market from the 1860s on. Even such a successful poet as S. Nadson started selling really well only after his death; the revenue from his posthumous editions financed the activities of *Literaturnyi Fond* for many years to come. It was not until Igor Severianin burst onto the Russian literary scene in the early twentieth century that poetry again found a champion to contend with prose’s domination of the market.

Severianin

After "Громокипящий кубок" [The Cup of Thunder] was published in 1913 Severianin, quite unexpectedly for himself as well as for the relatively few who knew him at that time, became one of the most popular poets in Russia—if not *the* most popular poet. While today we may think (or even not think at all) about Severianin as a middling poet who once had been mistakenly ranked among other Modernist aces, this was not the case one hundred years ago, in the 1910s. Critics of all orientations and affiliations were only too busy singing praises to this new Messiah<sup>96</sup> on the never quiet poetic stage of early twentieth-century Russia. Much was expected of him, as can be seen, for example, in these laudatory words of Severianin's staunchest admirer, Valerii Briusov:

Такой Игорь Северянин, как он представляется в лучших своих созданиях. Это – лирик, тонко воспринимающий природу и весь мир и умеющий несколькими характерными чертами заставить видеть то, что он рисует. Это – истинный поэт, глубоко переживающий жизнь с своими ритмами, заставляющий читателя страдать и радоваться вместе с собой. Это – ирония, остро подмечающий вокруг себя смешное и низкое, и клеймящий это в меткой сатире. Это – художник, которому открылись тайны стиха, и который сознательно стремился усовершенствовать свой инструмент, "свою лиру", говоря по-старинному.

[Such is Igor Severianin as he appears in his best creations. He is a lyric poet who subtly perceives nature and the whole world and who can make us see what he is drawing by just a few very characteristic touches. He is a true poet who experiences life very deeply and who makes the reader suffer and celebrate with him. He is an ironic poet who discerns sharply all that is base and amusing around him and who brands it as such in his skillful satire. He is an artist to whom the mysteries of verse were revealed, and who purposefully tries to refine his instrument, "his lyre," to use an old turn of phrase.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Severianin himself did not shy away from such a comparison: "Я прогремел на всю Россию // Как осканделенный герой! // Литературного мессию // Во мне приветствует порой..." (I have blared across all Russia, // Like a scandalous hero! As a literary Messiah // I am sometimes welcome." I. Severianin, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, 1. 5, St-Petersburg: PUBLISHER?, 1996, 72.

<sup>97</sup> Valerii Briusov, "Igor Severianin," in Terekhina, V. N. & Shubnikova-Guseva, N. I. eds. *Igor Severianin. Tsartvennyi Paiats. Avtobiograficheskie materialy. Pis'ma. Kritika*. St-Petersburg: Rostok, 303. Originally published in Pashukanis, V. V. (ed.) *Kritika o tvorchestve Igoria Severianina*. St-Petersburg, 1916. This particular essay Briusov wrote specifically for Pashukanis' collection, at Severianin's request.

Much in line with the overwhelmingly enthusiastic critical response were the actual sales of his poetry. "The Cup of Thunder" was reprinted nine times over the next five years, totaling over 33,000 copies. This may not seem like a lot, but if we remember that the most common print run for a collection of poetry hardly exceeded 200-300 copies, Severianin's success begins to really stand out. His subsequent collections of verse did not do much worse on the market either.

Not only was Severianin's poetry selling incredibly well, rivaling the print runs of his big prose brothers, but his live performances, the so-called "poezo-concerts," were very well attended, too. He famously sang or chanted his "poezy" (there is no formal way of distinguishing between regular poems and Severianin's "poezy," as the latter come in all shapes, rhythmic structures and rhyming patterns), driving the eager and ecstatic audience crazy. And yet his manner of public performance was conspicuously, demonstratively reserved, almost withdrawn. We know that he was quite deliberate in this public display of casual spontaneity. In one of his many autobiographies, Severianin notes:

Когда я выхожу на эстраду, я не знаю заранее, что я буду читать. Видите, у меня здесь чья-то визитная карточка. Я только что нанес на нее ряд заглавий моих стихов. Это мой репертуар, из которого я буду выбирать уже на эстраде... В лекторскую ввалились после оконченного доклада толпа поклонников. Все такой же спокойный, чеканящий слова, изысканный в медлительных движениях и чуть-чуть надменный, Игорь Северянин отошел к своим московским поклонникам. [When I get on the stage I do not know in advance what I am going to read. You see, here I have someone's card. I just put down on it several titles of my poems. This is my repertoire. I will be choosing from it when I am already on the stage.

A crowd of admirers rolled into the seminar room after the end of the talk. Igor Severianin, every bit as calm, rapping out his words, and elegant in his slow movements and somewhat aloof came out to meet his Moscow admirers].<sup>98</sup>

Whatever we may make of this cavalier confession, Severianin's awareness of his own public persona is very conspicuous. The poet switches from the first person (the quotation is taken from a fake interview with himself in which Severianin speaks in the first person, but also describes his persona through the eyes of an imaginary interlocutor) to the third-person, prompted by a crowd of admirers who bustled into the room. It is as if he is unable to maintain the intensity of the first-person narrative and the analytic, perceptive gaze associated with it, and instead flees at the first opportunity into viewing himself through the other's eyes. In fact, the poet is very eager to objectify himself in a gesture of self-presentation.

Incidentally, Igor Lotarev's literary pseudonym, Igor Severianin (or Igor-Severianin)<sup>99</sup> was just as much a part of his literary image as were the live performances of his poetry. Interestingly, this pen name might not have been of his own making. It also might have initially lacked the kind of Romantic ambience generally associated with it. It was likely suggested or, at the very least, coined by Igor Severianin's friend and mentor Konstantin Fofanov. Fofanov

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<sup>98</sup> I. Severianin, "U poeta: beseda s Igorem Severianinym", in V. N. Terekhina, V. N. & N. I. Shubnikova-Guseva, eds., *Igor Severianin. Tsartvennyi Paiats. Avtobiograficheskie materialy*, St. Petersburg: Rostok, 37.

<sup>99</sup> There are still debates regarding the proper spelling of the poet's pen name. From 1908 to 1913, Severianin published using the hyphenated version Igor-Severianin. From 1913 and, specifically, from the publication of "The Cup of Thunder" he switched (as Mikhail Petrov insists in his "Psevdonim poeta kak chast' tvortcheskogo naslediiia" i fakt biografii" (<http://www.hot.ee/m/mvp/cita/psevdonim/psevdonim.html>) --under pressure from his publisher) to the now familiar Igor Severianin. He did however continue to publish using the hyphenated version occasionally. The vicissitudes of spelling the poet's name prompted an actual debate at a meeting of the Writers Union in 2003, which decreed that the correct spelling should be without a hyphen, Igor Severianin.

commented on the poet's passion for skiing<sup>100</sup> in this 1908 poem, which portrays Severianin as a mythical, elusive skier gliding across the frozen wastes of the North:

Я видел вновь весны рожденье,  
Весенний плеск, веселый гул,  
Но прочитал твои творенья,  
Мой Северянин, - и заснул...  
И спало все в морозной неге -  
От рек хрустальных до высот,  
И, как гигант, мелькал на снеге  
При лунном свете лыжеход...  
[I saw the birth of spring again,  
The splash of spring, the merry boom,  
But I read your creations,  
O, my Severianin--and I fell asleep..  
And everything was asleep in frosty languor,  
From crystal rivers to the heights,  
And, like a giant, flitted on the snow,  
Under the moonlight, a skier]

We know that Severianin started publishing his verse under the pen name Igor-Severianin in the spring of 1908 (it was his sixteenth published collection, "Зарницы мысли" [Flashes of

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<sup>100</sup>This "Northern" hobby of Severianin was quite well known to his friends and close associates. Remembering K. Fofanov and how Severianin used to come visit him in winter on skis, Severianin writes: "Лыжный спорт с детства - один из моих любимейших, и на своих одиннадцатифутовых норвежских беговых лыжах с пружинящими ход американскими "хомутиками" я пробегал большие расстояния." [Skiing was my favorite sport since childhood. On my eleven-feet long Norwegian skis, with springy American buckles I covered great distances (Igor Severianin, "Iz vospominanii o K. M. Fofanove," in I. Severianin, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, V. 5, , St-Petersburg: 1996, 9). Later in a letter to Irina Bortman in 1927 he is even more explicit about his passion for skiing: "Когда именно вы поедете домой? Я, право, не знаю, удастся ли нам попасть к Вам: мои лыжи сломаны, а новые я хотел купить в Ревеле, полагая, что вечер будет до праздников. Теперь же я задумываюсь. За последнее время трижды ездил в Нарву, но там ничего подходящего, - в смысле лыж, - нет. [When are you going home? I honestly do not know whether I would be able to visit you: my skis are broken, I wanted to buy new ones in Revel assuming that evening will come before holidays. Now I wonder: I went down to Narva three times recently, but I found nothing suitable there in terms of skis] In V. N. Terekhina, V. N. & N. I. Shubnikova-Guseva, eds., *Igor Severianin. Tsartvennyi Paiats. Avtobiograficheskie materialy*, St. Petersburg: Rostok, 244.

Thought]). Fofanov's poem was written just a few months prior to that. Mikhail Petrov speculates that Igor Lotarev might well have acquired his soon-to-become famous pseudonym from this celebratory poem addressed to Lotarev-Severianin.<sup>101</sup>

Be that as it may, Severianin was not likely to be too keen on remembering the athletic circumstances surrounding the emergence of his literary name. He might have been equally forgetful of the first dozen or so books of poetry he had published in complete obscurity, which was likely due to the rather conventional nature of the verse he was writing in the 1900s. While Severianin published his first poem in 1904 ("К предстоящему выходу портартурский эскадры," "On the upcoming sailing of the Port Arthur Fleet"), it was not until 1910 that he first drew critical attention to his persona. He remembers this (actually, slightly inaccurately) in another autobiography:

Критика меня заметила только на 26 брошюре, в которой шла Хабанера II ("Вонзите штопор в упругость пробки..."). Это было в 1909 году. Меня принялись ругать, а я смеялся и читал "Fleurs du mal." [The critics noticed me only at the 26th

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<sup>101</sup> В посвящении Фофанова обращают на себя внимание два практически равнозначных в плане самоназвания существительных - «северянин» и «лыжеход»: Игорь-Северянин = Игорь-Лыжеход. Поэт отдал предпочтение "северянину", вероятно, как наиболее обобщающему, с его точки зрения, хотя «лыжеход» как будто более конкретен и индивидуален. Объяснить выбор практически невозможно, потому что прерогатива называть вещи своими именами (давать имена вещам и тварям) принадлежит только самому поэту. Современные исследователи связывают происхождение псевдонима и с Северной столицей - Петербургом, в котором поэт родился, и с окрестностями северного русского города Череповца, в котором прошли юношеские годы поэта, даже с северными реками Судой, Шексной, Нелазой. Однако все эти предположения вечно останутся на правах гипотез, которые невозможно ни доказать, ни опровергнуть. [In Fofanov's dedicatory poem one's attention is drawn to two almost identical self-identifying nouns, "Northerner" and "Skier," "Igor the Northerner" = "Igor the Skier." The poet himself preferred "The Northerner" as more generalizing, from his own point of view, however "The Skier" is more concrete and personal. One cannot explain the choice as it is the poet's own right to call things by their own names (to give names to things and creatures). Contemporary scholars link the origin of this pen name with the Northern capital, Petersburg, where the poet was born, as well as with the environs of Cherepovets, where the poet spent the years of his youth, or even with the Northern rivers Suda, Sheksna, and Nelaza. But all these ideas will remain hypothetical that can be proven neither right nor wrong]. Mikhail Petrov, "Pseudonim poeta kak chast' tvortcheskogo nasledii i fakt biografii." <http://www.hot.ee/m/mvp/cita/pseudonim/pseudonim.html>

brochure, in which there was my poem "Habanera II" ("Let's drive the bottle opener into the elasticity of the wine-cork"). This was in 1909. They started castigating me, and I was laughing and reading "Fleurs du mal"]<sup>102</sup>

Severianin is somewhat mistaken—he is off by one year. The critical response he evokes here actually dates from 1910. Ironically, it was the dying Leo Tolstoy who "could not remain silent" when he read these early provocative lines by Severianin: "Вонзим же штопор в упругость пробки, // И взоры женщин не будут робки" [Let's drive the bottle opener into the elasticity of the wine-cork, And the eyes of women will not be shy]. Tolstoy's response was quoted in an article by I. Nazhivin that first appeared in "Утро России" [Morning of Russia] on 27 January, 1910; supposedly, Tolstoy talked about Severianin's poem over dinner and was expectedly negative: "Чем занимаются! Чем занимаются! Вокруг -- виселицы, полчища безработных, убийства, невероятное пьянство, а у них -- упругость пробки!" [What do they do! What do they do! There are gallows around, hordes of unemployed, murders, incredible alcoholism, and they have--the elasticity of the wine-cork!].<sup>103</sup>

To be fair, Tolstoy's remark offers a rather favorable, almost complimentary misreading of Severianin's poem. It casts him as a kind of aesthete, an Oscar Wilde type out of touch with the social reality of contemporary Russia and indolently squandering his time on erotic adventures and other trifling affairs. The unmistakably derogatory, irritated tone of Tolstoy's

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<sup>102</sup> Igor Severianin, "Moia poezia. Ispoved' Igoria Severianina dlia Sinego zhurnala," in V. N. Terekhina, V. N. & N. I. Shubnikova-Guseva, eds., *Igor Severianin. Tsartvennyi Paiats. Avtobiograficheskie materialy*, St. Petersburg: Rostok, 35.

<sup>103</sup> V. N. Terekhina and N. I. Shubnikova-Guseva, eds., *Igor Severianin glazami sovremennikov*, St. Petersburg: Poligraf, 2009, 11; The original essay by I. Nazhivin was printed in *Utro Rossii*, N 58, Jan. 27, 1910; reprinted in I. Nazhivin. *Iz zhizni L. N. Tolstogo*. Moscow, 1911.



response may also be interpreted as an implicit acknowledgment of Severianin's inalienable difference. In fact, Severianin eagerly follows suit when he quotes Tolstoy in his autobiography by merrily concluding, "they started castigating me, and I was laughing and reading *Fleurs du mal*." It would have been so much worse for Severianin if such a classic, such an established author as Tolstoy, had actually sincerely welcomed his poetry.

Igor Severianin's "The Cup of Thunder" was published on March 4, 1913. The book immediately became scandalously famous, garnering hundreds of critical responses and reviews—mostly positive. It was reprinted seven times over the next two years.

It is interesting to inspect how the poet himself bitterly remembers this moment of his literary triumph thirty-five years later, in an autobiographical and virtually unknown piece written in 1940, when he was living abroad, in Estonia, in Narva-Joesuu. This tiny autobiographical piece is entitled "Igor Severianin beseduet s Igorem Lotarevym" [Igor Severianin talks with Igor Lotarev], and presents an imaginary dialogue between himself, Igor Lotarev, and his other self, the forgotten-by-then poet Severianin. He writes [the first person speaking is Igor Lotarev]:

-- Итак, уже 35 лет как вы не печтаетесь.  
-- Этими словами вы подчеркиваете мой возраст, -- смеясь отвечает он. -- Пять лет назад я справлял 30-летие. Сегодня я постарел на пять лет. Почему не принято справлять пятилетнего юбилея? За *такой* юбилей я отдал бы с радостью все последующие 30 лет жизни! Тогда меня боготворили, буквально носили на руках, избрали королем поэтом, сами нарасхват покупали мои книги. Тогда мне не приходилось -- дико вымолвить -- рассылать их по квартирам почти и вовсе не знакомых людей, предлагать их и навязывать.

[ -- So, it's been thirty-five years since you published your last piece.

-- You are emphasizing my age by saying this, he answered with a laugh. Five years ago I celebrated the thirtieth anniversary. Today I am five years older. Why don't we celebrate the five-year anniversary? For such an anniversary I would gladly have given the following thirty years of my life. Back then I was worshipped, adored, elected King of Poets; my books were selling so incredibly well. Back then I did not have to--it's horrible to even utter this--I did not have to mail my books to people I do not even know, to offer and to throw my books at strangers.]<sup>104</sup>

This somewhat sentimental quotation aptly captures the staggering vicissitudes of Severianin's life and literary career. From the most venerated figure on the poetic scene in 1913-14 he gradually but unswervingly descended into virtual oblivion and total obscurity. If in 1913 such different authors as Ivan Bunin, Nikolai Gumilev, Valerii Briusov, Konstantin Fofanov, Fyodor Sologub all welcomed (however differently) the appearance of "Gromokipiatchii kubok," it soon became rather commonplace to disparage and denigrate Severianin's poetry, and eventually to ignore him altogether. Such a literary trajectory is rather uncommon, even unique. Indeed, we rather expect a modernist poet to start out as a rebel, a nameless dissenter who defies, to a greater or lesser extent, the norms, traditions, and rules of the literary field and then, perhaps, rises to fame and prominence, effectively trading his or her marginal status for recognition in other fields, and in the long run, maybe even turning into a figure of the establishment (Blok, Mandel'shtam, Pasternak). But for the final genuflection to occur certain rules must still be observed--and not the least among them is what Bourdieu called a generalized game of "loser wins," which predominantly characterizes the economy of practices in the most autonomous

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<sup>104</sup> Igor Severianin, "Igor Severianin beseduet s Igorem Lotarevym o svoem 35-letnem iubilee," in V. N. Terekhina, V. N. & N. I. Shubnikova-Guseva, eds., *Igor Severianin. Tsartvennyi Paiats. Avtobiograficheskie materialy*, St. Petersburg: Rostok, 44.

sectors of the field of cultural production—modernist poetry, for instance. Specifically, Bourdieu writes:

Thus, at least in the most perfectly autonomous sector of the field of cultural production, where the only audience aimed at is other producers (as with Symbolist poetry), the economy of practices is based, as in a generalized game of 'loser wins', on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies: that of business (it excludes the pursuit of profit and does not guarantee any sort of correspondence between investments and monetary gains), that of power (it condemns honors and temporal greatness), and even that of institutionalized cultural authority (the absence of any academic training or consecration may be considered a virtue).<sup>105</sup>

The case of Igor Severianin may well serve as a perfect counter-example to Bourdieu's vision of this most autonomous sector. Not only did Severianin's attitude not exclude the "pursuit of profit"—but he even explicitly lamented his once so well-selling books, and with a shudder acknowledged that in the 1940s he had to actively pursue his readers in order to catch their attention. Equally distressing for him was the memory of the various poetic honors bestowed upon him in the 1910s, the title of King of Poets being the most singularly memorable. Later in the same autobiographic piece he talks even more lucidly about the monetary aspect of his poetic existence:

--Если бы каждый поклонник давал мне всего-навсего по 10 центов год, -- но, понимаете, обязательно каждый -- я чувствовал бы себя совершенно обеспеченным человеком, мог бы вдохновенно писать и, пожалуй, бесплатно раздавать неимущим свои книги. Но таких поклонников или я не знаю, или их вовсе нет. Судя по количеству поздравлений, я не заработал бы больше кроны, -- с неподражаемой язвительностью ответил поэт.

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105 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. and ed. Randal Johnson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 39

[If every admirer would give me as little as ten cents a year, but, please understand, every single one, -- I would feel that I were very well off, I would be able to write with inspiration and, perhaps, would even give out my books to the poor. But such admirers are non-existent, or I do not know them. If I were to judge by the number of complimentary notes I have received, I have not earned more than a krona, -- the poet coined it with unmatched pungency.]<sup>106</sup>

Such a confession might have been embarrassingly awkward had it not been so naive or, better to say, unpretentiously spontaneous. Severianin is certainly unequivocal about compounding poetic production with money. Monetary drought is candidly marked here as the key factor in his not writing. In effect, the reversal of Bourdieu's scheme is even more palpable. Severianin does not write to pursue profit, but rather requires some monetary gain before he can even begin writing. In this quotation, Severianin effectively positions himself not just on the other end of the spectrum of autonomy from that which Bourdieu anticipates from an avant-garde poet. Severianin is almost somewhere off the charts, bridging the gap between the cultural (or literary) field and others. His situation of total obscurity in 1940, just like his unnatural prominence thirty-five years earlier, prompts him to see and say things quite incompatible with what we normally expect of a modernist poet.

While Severianin's life and literary career has not been much written about, such an omission is not due to the scarcity of material. As I've mentioned, the poet himself wrote seven autobiographies detailing the successive steps of his poetic path. From these autobiographies, for example, we know that Severianin was superstitiously sensitive about the fact that he was born in

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<sup>106</sup> Igor Severianin, "Igor Severianin beseduet s Igorem Lotarevym svoem 35-letnem iubilee", in Terehina, V. N. & Shubnikova-Guseva, N. I., eds. *Igor Severianin. Tsartvennii Paiats. Avtobiograficheskie materialy. Pis'ma. Kritika*. St-Petersburg: Rostok, 2005.

the same year that Nadson died and the first volume of Fofanov's poetry was published—1887.

His family was related, through his mother, to both Fet and Karamzin<sup>107</sup>.

Severianin was aware of both connections, and particularly proud of the latter, writing in a 1912 poem:

Что в жилах северного барда  
Струится кровь Карамзина.  
И вовсе жребий мой не горек!..  
Я верю, доблестный мой дед,  
Что я — в поэзии историк,  
Как ты — в истории поэт!

[In the veins of the Northern bard //The blood of Karamzin flows. // And my lot is far from bitter! // I believe, O my virtuous grandfather, // That I am a historian in poetry, //As much as you were a poet in history!]

It may not be exactly clear whether there is anything but a fanciful turn of the poetic phrase in this playful juxtaposition. While Karamzin as a "poet of history" does make sense, Severianin as a "historian of poetry" seems rather far-fetched. Although we may be led to expect a metaphoric transference by the symmetry of grammatical subjects (just like you were, I am), we are instead given a rather pointless metonymic relation of correspondence. Severianin reverses the phrase "a poet of history," something that can or, perhaps, was said about Karamzin, and then hopes that such an operation will produce some kind of meaning. Instead, the stark, glaring meaninglessness of this construction is the only consolation for a thorough and persistent reader. Such "poetic juggling" is rather characteristic of Severianin and crops up in many of his most famous poems. I am not being condescending or judgmental, as so many of Severianin's

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<sup>107</sup> V. Terekhina and N. Shubnikova-Guseva, "Za strunnoi izgorodiu liry," in V. Terekhina and N. Shubnikova-Guseva, *Igor Severianin: tsarstvennyi paitis*, St. Petersburg: Rostok, 2005, 9.

contemporary critics were when they reflected upon this element of his poetics. Rather I am curious to trace the history of Severianin's "gymnastics of nothingness," and see whether, perhaps, it did not die out with Severianin after all. I suspect that something as remote as, say, Prigov's stanza<sup>108</sup> may be traced back to Severianin's seemingly far-fetched and contrived constructions.

It was Osip Mandelshtam who anticipated the vicissitudes of Severianin's literary biography in his early critical review of "The Cup of Thunder."<sup>109</sup> This caustic little essay, originally published by "Гиперборей" [Hyperborean] in March, 1913 presents the ambiguities of Severianin's poetic stance in a characteristically metaphoric, convoluted, yet illuminating way. In this essay Mandel'shtam yields very little to Severianin's grandiose poetic ambitions. Stating rather unequivocally at the beginning that "[a]s a poet Severianin is defined chiefly by the shortcomings of his poetry," Mandel'shtam goes on to disassemble anything one might find dear or attractive in Severianin's poetry. Severianin's poetry is revealed to consist of terrible neologisms, haberdasher's beauty, and misplaced exotic foreign words. The final blow is particularly harsh: Mandel'shtam accuses Severianin of not hearing the ways of the word:

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<sup>108</sup> As in: "Вот я предположим, обычный поэт, // А тут по прихоти русской судьбы // Приходится совестью нации быть, // А как ею быть, коли совести нет, // Стихи, скажем, есть, а вот совести -- нет. // Как тут быть? [Say, I am an ordinary poet, // But in the freak of Russian Fate, // I ought to be the conscience of the nation, // And how can I be it when I don't have conscience, // I have poems all right, but I have no conscience. // What am I to do?] Dmitrii Prigov, *Napisannoe s 1975 po 1989*, <http://www.vavilon.ru/texts/prigov4-3.html>

<sup>109</sup> Osip Mandelshtam, *Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, trans. Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979, 104.

"[being] insensitive to the laws of the Russian language, and unable to hear how a word grows and matures, he [Severianin] prefers words that have fallen into disuse, or that were never part of the language, to living words."<sup>110</sup>

Having said this, Mandel'shtam rather unexpectedly stops short of placing Severianin outside of poetry altogether. Instead he turns around and reluctantly admits that Severianin is a poet after all:

Nevertheless, Igor Severianin is a poet by virtue of his simple rapture and his dry *joie de vivre*. His verse resembles a grasshopper in its powerful musculature. Having hopelessly confused all cultures, the poet is sometimes able to give charming forms to the chaos that reigns in his imagination.<sup>111</sup>

I find this sudden admission rather suspicious, not to say forced or perhaps purposefully deceptive. In spite of all the unconcealed pungency of Mandel'shtam's critique, Severianin is allowed to retain, at the very least, the title of a poet—by virtue of his "simple rapture"<sup>112</sup> and "dry *joie de vivre*." That, and the strong muscle tone of a grasshopper still make him a poet—albeit understandably a poor one. As a matter of fact, neither of these two exonerating qualities strikes me as necessarily poetic attributes. Outside of the context of Mandel'shtam's essay, both qualities would hardly ever be conjoined with verse. It's not easy to visualize a "dry *joie de vivre*." *Joie de vivre* can be eager, energetic, effortless, or maybe dull, suppressed, forced—but

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>112</sup> "легкой восторженности" in the original, which would be, perhaps, better translated as "easy excitability."

dry? "Simple rapture" (or, better, "easy excitability") may come off as more natural, but when it's put forward as a redeeming quality in an otherwise mediocre poet, it hardly appears up to the task.

The powerful musculature of a grasshopper is equally misleading. Grasshoppers are not normally thought of as particularly muscular animals; they may be agile, nimble, smart—but strong? Again, taken outside of the smooth, lulling flow of Mandel'shtam's essay, the idea of a grasshopper's strength appears to be nothing short of an oxymoron.

Of course, one may object that insect names can actually be quite poetic—Mandel'shtam's own "Дайте Тютчеву стрекозу" ("Give Tiutchev a dragonfly," 1932) and "Ламарк" ("Lamarck," 1932) forcefully conflate the poetic and the entomological.<sup>113</sup> Yet this phrase of Mandel'shtam's, "the powerful musculature of a grasshopper," is quite elusive. Even if entomological definition may work as a clandestine designation of the poetic, the muscles—or the lack thereof—imputed to the author of "The Cup of Thunder" offhandedly emaciates Severianin's poetic powers.

In other words, while Severianin's poetry meets all the criteria of the poetic, one would still be hard-pressed to call it poetry. Experiments with language and poetic innovations are not a *Ding-an-sich* of poetic discourse. But the cogency of any poetic innovation must be reinforced by the indication of at least some claim to autonomy in the literary field. This is something that Severianin (just like Nekrasov sixty years before) utterly lacked.

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<sup>113</sup> And then one, of course, remembers the endearing form of address used by Viazemsky in his letters to Pushkin, "сверчок" [cricket].



### **Chapter 3: “And I don’t owe a particle of my spirit to it, either:”**

#### **Mandel’shtam, Modernism, and Capitalism**

##### **The Literary Market at the Turn of the Century**

The development of the Russian literary market in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was not just characterized by quantitative expansion (more books published, more copies printed, higher honoraria both absolutely and on the average) but also by small but steady qualitative changes. The market was gradually becoming more diversified and compartmentalized. Subfields were emerging within it: "classics," for example, which included deceased authors, the copyright for whose works had run out (Pushkin's texts, for instance, came out of copyright in 1887, precipitating a boom in publishing). Editions of classics (Pushkin, Gogol, Turgenev—even Tolstoy, that "living dead classic") regularly sold in the hundreds of thousands of copies in the 1900s.<sup>114</sup>

Not far behind "classics" was the subfield of "entertainment" literature, which was becoming more and more distinct. Authors like Anastasia Verbitskaia, Mikhail Artsybashev, Dmitry Mamin-Sibiryak, Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Alexander Amfiteatrov, and Maxim

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<sup>114</sup> The overview of the Russian literary market of the period is taken from Jeffrey Brooks, “Readers and Reading at the End of the Tsarist Era” in William Mills Todd III and Robert Belknap, eds., *Literature and Society in Imperial Russia, 1800–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 97–150. Most statistical data on the number of copies printed is taken from *Knizhnaia Letopis, 1907-1977* (Moscow: Glavnoe upravlenie po delam pechati). For statistical data for 1884-1907 I used *Russkii vestnik, 1884-1913*.

Gorky all published in editions ranging from 10,000 to 50,000 copies in the 1900s and 1910s. By far the most successful was Verbitskaia, whose novel *Keys to Happiness* sold over 500,000 copies in the early 1910s. For the sake of comparison, the print run for the first edition of Bely's *Petersburg* in 1916 was a mere 6,000 copies.

The fate of poetry in this blaring publishing industry boom was not exactly enviable. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the number of copies sold per title was steadily on the rise across all genres—with the one conspicuous exception of poetry. The size of the poetry editions did not change much (or at all, actually) throughout the nineteenth century: Pushkin's "Southern" poems were printed in 1,200 copies as a rule<sup>115</sup>; Nekrasov's 1856 collection was printed in 3,000 copies<sup>116</sup>; Nadson's posthumous editions were printed in 2,400 copies—and these are some of the most successful editions of poetry in the history of Russian literature. Others fared much, much worse. But even numbers that had been quite impressive in the 1820s were barely noticeable in the vastly increased flow of printed materials ninety years later. The size of poetry editions even diminished over the course of the nineteenth century while the literary market kept on expanding. If the scandalously famous *Gromokipiashii Kubok* by Igor Severianin sold over 31,000 copies in 1913-1918 in ten editions, Mandel'shtam's *Kamen'* was printed in a meager 300 copies in 1913. Bal'mont, Briusov, Blok, Bely never published a collection of poetry in more than 2,000 copies. Poetry's share in the literary marketplace dwindled, with very few exceptions, to virtually nothing.

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<sup>115</sup> N. Smirnov-Sokolsk, *Rasskazy o prizheznennykh izdaniakh Pushkina*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo vsesoiuznoi knizhnoi palaty, 1962, 45.

<sup>116</sup> N. S. Ashukin, *Letopis zhizni i tvorchestva N. A. Nekrasova*, Moscow: Academia, 1935, 160.

I find it then rather startling and almost preposterous that the period later known as "The Silver Age of Russian Poetry"—defined in all the major textbooks on Russian literature as a time when poetry reached its (second highest) apogee, and when the very few novels left to us were written by poets—was a period in which poetry was actually shuttled off to the very fringes of the literary market. In terms of copies sold in the 1900s and 1910s, poetry books were dwarfed by their big prose brothers. If a disinterested, objective (and, admittedly, stupidly immune to the charms of the poetic function of language) historian from Mars were ever to dig into the archives and study Russian literary history of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, this historian would be hard-pressed to call the 1890s-1910s an age of poetry. Looking at the actual data of the literary market, this period was anything but an age of poetry, much less one that could be named after a precious and pricey metal. And yet we know this period as the Silver Age of Russian poetry.

One way to explain this representational discrepancy is to consider the social trajectories of producers of prose and producers of poetry. If I may be forgiven a rather vast (but necessary) generalization, I would venture to say that many Silver Age poets (this is particularly true for the so-called Symbolists, but also for some poets of later generations) were by and large independently wealthy individuals, and as such they were not nearly as much invested in the economic viability of their work as were contemporary prose writers. Remembering Bourdieu and his definition of avant-garde poetry as "the most perfectly autonomous sector of the field of cultural production, <...> [where] the economy of practices is based, as in a generalized game of 'loser wins', on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary

economies,"<sup>117</sup> we may say that the Russian Silver Age adhered to this formula only superficially. Russian modernist poets did indeed claim a high degree of independence from readers' expectations, the demands of the market, politics, codes of conduct, sexual norms, and so on. But this independence was dependent on having a secure economic base, and not the lack thereof normally expected of a vagabond avant-garde.

Consider someone like the poet Valerii Briusov<sup>118</sup>. He was born into a rich merchant family. His grandfather on his father's side, Kuz'ma Andreevich Briusov, was a serf who had bought his way out of serfdom, and made a fortune in the cork trade during the Crimean War. By the end of his life he owned a brick house in Moscow and left over 200,000 rubles to his heirs when he died. Briusov's father was a merchant as well—and an aspiring, although largely unsuccessful writer. He also owned a racing stable and even lost some money through his addiction to gambling. (Curiously enough, Briusov's first published piece was a short article in defense of sports betting, published by the periodical *Russkii sport* in 1889.) As Briusov was growing up, he hopped from one elite private gymnasium to another until he entered the Historico-Philological Department of Moscow University (graduated 1899). During his adolescence Briusov enjoyed a largely independent and luxuriously indolent lifestyle made possible by the favorable economic circumstances of his family. In his "Autobiography" he writes:

I was about twelve or thirteen years old when I learned the "mercenary love" and peeped into cafes and "merry houses." These temptations became so indispensable for me that I

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<sup>117</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, 39.

<sup>118</sup> See Valerii Briusov, *Iz moei zhizni. Avtobiograficheskaia i memuarnaia proza* (Moscow: Terra-Terra, 1994).

started devoting a great deal of my time to them. <...> Nobody paid any attention to what I did. I could come home very late or even in the morning, and as I always had pocket money I could fully indulge myself in the world of 'night adventures.'<sup>119</sup>

Unlike Briusov, who ended up living in his parents' house in Moscow until 1910 (by which time he was a thirty-seven-year-old widely recognized heavyweight of Russian modernism), the prose writer Maxim Gorky had run away from his abusive parents five times before leaving home for good at the age of seventeen<sup>120</sup>. After supporting himself with various odd jobs, he decided to embark on a literary career. But this meant depending on writing for his livelihood: he simply could not afford to dismiss the expectations of potential readers or disregard the pecuniary aspects of his new literary profession. He went on to become one of the best-selling authors at the turn of the century. His conquest of the market was far from incidental, of course. While Briusov and Gorky were contemporaries and entered the Russian literary scene at about the same time, their respective positions within the literary field could not have been more different. If Gorky became a fully professional writer who acknowledged his reliance on the field of cultural production from which he could never claim independence, Briusov's social and literary trajectory (and the trajectories of many other Russian Symbolists as well) was more reminiscent of an earlier model of writer-amateur for whom literature was essentially a hobby, albeit a very important and time-consuming one.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>120</sup> And even tried to kill his stepfather on one occasion: "One evening she and her husband quarreled in his presence. Her husband knocked her to her knees and began kicking her in the chest. She groaned with her head turned away from him. Excited by her distress, his eyes shining, he kicked her still harder. Horrified, Alexey took a knife from the table and stabbed at his stepfather's side with all his might. Luckily, the blade only slashed his clothes and scratched his skin. He ran from the room, howling. " Henri Troyat, *Gorky*, trans. Lowell Bair, New York: Crown Publishers, 1989, 5.

From a purely economic perspective, Russian Silver Age poetry was going against the grain of the Russian literary market. At a time when Russian literature was becoming more and more professionalized, Russian modernist poets—and particularly those who espoused or were influenced by the idea of "art for art's sake"—were insisting on a model of the literary field long since outdated and cast away. Even early nineteenth-century Russian Romantic poets, like Pushkin, Boratynsky, or Karolina Pavlova, had felt the need to reflect on and negotiate with the growing presence of the literary market, both in their writing and in their lives. In even starker contrast, poets like Nikolai Nekrasov or Afanasy Fet, in the middle of the century, actively sought to adapt their poetics to become competitive players on the market. As I argued in the previous chapter, Russian poets of the middle and second half of the nineteenth century were eager to discover tricks of the trade that could put their literary production on a par with the increasingly dominant novel. Seeing their ambitions snubbed by the readership and the market, poets of later generations, like the Russian Symbolists as well as those who came after them, made a decisive turnabout in their attitude to the market. Spurned by the market, they acted as if they had been the ones to spurn and reject it in the first place. Their poetic output reflected this programmatic neglect or even disdain of (mass) readership just as much as the poetry of Nekrasov and many other poets fifty years before had surreptitiously signaled their ambition to become prose peers, from the economic point of view. This turnabout was also due to the already mentioned fact that the typical Russian modernist poet was much more likely to be an independently wealthy individual and could thus afford to assume an independent stance.

In what follows I am going to focus on two aspects of this phenomenon. First, I am going to unveil how poetry in early twentieth-century Russia invariably commented on its peculiar

economic status, and how the increasingly isolated, almost forlorn position of Russian poets on the market made its way into the very fabric of their verse. For that purpose I would first like to identify a number of key features that distinguished Russian bourgeois prose of the period. This will allow me to do a comparative reading of a number of contemporaneous Russian poetic texts, highlighting ways in which they deviate from and purposefully subvert the norms, expectations, and practices specific to prose and reflective of its increasingly high degree of professionalization. As I argued before, I will argue here that poetic texts do comment, just as prose does, on the economic circumstances of their creation, and it has been merely our inability to read them economically that has obscured their economic agenda to us.

What then distinguishes bourgeois prose during this period? Like a good Marxist, I certainly believe that—no matter the resistance on behalf of a particular writer—bourgeois ideology always does present itself in bourgeois prose, and does make itself palpably manifest in many ways. One approach to evaluating the actual impact or, better say, the presence of capitalist ideology in bourgeois writing would be to consider the precarious economic circumstances of the typical bourgeois writer. Such presence is most acutely realized in situations of deliberate resistance to the interposition of the market. Consider Marcel Proust, the subject of the opening chapter of Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. Adorno ardently defends the position of an independently wealthy writer in a capitalist world, and even goes on to suggest that such a position (due to its inherently ambiguous status, since an independently wealthy writer is neither a true professional in literature nor a good bourgeois in the social world) may be the most precariously authentic. Adorno writes:

The man of independent means who chooses [a literary career] out of repugnance for the ignominy of earning money will not be disposed to acknowledge the fact. For this he is punished. He is not a 'professional,' is ranked in the competitive hierarchy as a dilettante no matter how well he knows his subject, and must, if he wants to make a career, show himself even more resolutely blinkered than the most inveterate specialist. The urge to suspend the division of labor which, within certain limits, his economic situation enables him to satisfy, is thought particularly disreputable: it betrays a disinclination to sanction the operations imposed by society, and domineering competence permits no such idiosyncrasies. The departmentalization of mind is a means of abolishing mind where it is not exercised *ex officio*, under contract. It performs this task all the more reliably since anyone who repudiates the division of labor--if only by taking pleasure in his work--makes himself vulnerable by its standards in ways inseparable from elements of his superiority. Thus is order ensured: some have to play the game because they cannot otherwise live, and those who could live otherwise are kept out because they do not want to play the game.<sup>121</sup>

Adorno's repudiation of professional writers and his loquacious exoneration of those like Proust (the titular specimen of the dying species that Adorno is shepherding here) who aim to write for pleasure may seem compelling, but it is intrinsically flawed. Indeed, the division of labor, Adorno's quarry in *Minima Moralia*, is at the very core of bourgeois ideology and bourgeois writing as we have come to know it. All the major nineteenth-century bourgeois novels implicitly dramatize the division of labor and the consequent alienation from one's work. We may remember Levin<sup>122</sup> and his utopian agenda of "salvation through agriculture," which is never consummated since his obsessive farming signifies the distance between him and actual peasants perhaps more distinctly than anything else. In Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852-53), Richard Carstone's inability to choose among several professions (and thus submit to the division of

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<sup>121</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, London & New York: Verso, 2005, 15.

<sup>122</sup> The protagonist of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1873-1877).



labor) prefigures his downfall. In Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Jude Fawley's transient, always compromised career choices (between the university, the Church, and architecture), compounded by sexual inconsistency, lead inevitably to isolation from his internally less splintered companions, and ultimately to death. Hardy is perhaps more explicit than others when he puts this tart invective in the mouth of Jude, who is serving here as the authorial *alter ego*:

"It is a difficult question...—that question I had to grapple with, and which thousands are weighing at the present moment in these uprising times—whether to follow uncritically the track he finds himself in, without considering his aptness for it, or to consider what his aptness or bent may be, and re-shape his course accordingly. I tried to do the latter, and I failed. But I don't admit that my failure proved my view to be a wrong one, or that my success would have made it a right one; though that's how we appraise such attempts nowadays—I mean, not by their essential soundness, but by their accidental outcomes."<sup>123</sup>

Such unrepentant vindication of one's failure and the aggressive assertion of the impossibility of establishing the "essential soundness," the authentic validity of one's vocation, not only predates Adorno by some forty years, but also anticipates and even tacitly engages with his argument. Just as Jude accuses the crowd of spectators of being led astray in their reliance on "accidental outcomes," Adorno is clever but overly enthusiastic in his approbation of those like Proust who might have preserved their writerly integrity at the expense of always being regarded as outsiders. The fact that the independently wealthy Proust did well by taking the road less travelled (which others did not or could not find) does not prove the rule.

In other words, I believe that it was the urgent and pervasive need to negotiate that controls the very essence of the bourgeois novel. We might also think of this orientation to

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<sup>123</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, London & New York: W.W. Norton, Norton Critical Editions, 1999, 255-56.

negotiation, to compromise as, say, the internal dialogization which for Bakhtin defines the very substance of the new bourgeois novel. Indeed, Bakhtin famously argues that the dialogic nature of the word in the novel (as opposed to poetry!) is the most palpable defining characteristic of the genre. In "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin writes:

Along with the internal contradictions inside the object itself, the prose writer witnesses as well the unfolding of social heteroglossia surrounding the object, the Tower-of-Babel mixing of languages that goes on around any object; the dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it.<sup>124</sup>

I am not quoting this passage here to pledge allegiance to the Bakhtinian perspective, but rather to demonstrate that there may be more than one take on the economic, social, and writerly "in-between-ness" of the bourgeois novel. I am very far from subscribing to Bakhtin's blunt valorization of prose over poetry, especially when he reserves the coveted heteroglossia solely for prose. Ever since Bakhtin's ideas became popular in the 1960s, much has been said about his neglect or blatant disregard of the dialogic in verse. My own research and some of my close readings throughout these chapters certainly provide testimony to sometimes overlooked or misread situations of internal dialogue in poetry. Still, I suspect that Bakhtin's presentation of verse as a generally more homogenous discourse ("Even when speaking of alien things, the poet speaks in his own language"<sup>125</sup>) may be quite useful for our discussion.

I would be much more willing to side with someone like Walter Benjamin in his essay on "The Storyteller," juxtaposing storytelling with the novel. What he has to say about the novelist seems quite relevant to our discussion. Benjamin succinctly notes:

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<sup>124</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel", in Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, 278.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 286.

The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life.<sup>126</sup>

The “incommensurability” of the novel, a result of its disassociation from experience, might have surprised the readers of the classic Russian nineteenth-century novelists, who were readily anticipating a wealth of moral counseling from those “engineers of human souls.” But even a proverbial moralizer like Tolstoy—though he was incapable of finishing either of his epics without indulging himself in a “good life for dummies” type of clarification—famously refused to expatiate on what his *Anna Karenina* really meant, coyly saying that he would have to write a new (another?) *Anna Karenina* to explain. This is the very incommensurability of which Benjamin speaks.

I would venture to say that the history of the bourgeois novel could be regarded as a history of attempted escapes from the clutches of the compromises imposed upon the novel by the forces of the market. Marcel Proust may be alienated from the camp of professional writers, but also from the bourgeoisie. Or consider Dostoevsky, who habitually failed to meet his deadlines, but then inscribed this failure into the marrow structure of his work. Or even Tolstoy, who (much like Marcel Proust) recoiled at the tag of “professional writer”—by renouncing all royalties from his published work, he positioned himself as an “eternal outsider” in the literary field, but his last-ditch attempt at escaping literary fame and his status as a “living” classic only solidified that which he had vainly hoped to dispel.

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<sup>126</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller”, in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, 87.

Indeed, I believe that such internalized fragmentation, the essential, ubiquitous, and multi-layered compromise may be one of the defining, structuring elements of bourgeois writing, and in particular, the bourgeois novel. Certainly, this has something to do with the economic “in-between” status of the bourgeois writer.

Poetry, on the other hand, was much less involved with the market, and was consequently less affected by its presence. As we have seen, at the beginning of the twentieth century Russian poetry was decidedly a peripheral element on the literary market, sailing against the wind of the growing monetization of literature. While Russian prose writers were becoming more like true professionals, Russian poets of the period were gravitating towards the opposite pole, that of leisurely amateurs. It makes sense, then, to suppose that the poetic production of this period would similarly internalize or dramatize its own economic circumstances, just as the bourgeois novel did. It had to come to grips with its outsider role, and it did so in a variety of ways.

### “A body is given to me”

Consider something as conspicuously simplistic and seemingly naïve as Mandel'shtam's early little poem “Дано мне тело – что мне делать с ним” (“A body is given to me—what shall I do with it?”)<sup>127</sup> The crooning rhythm of its iambic pentameter bound by contiguous masculine rhyme (aabbcc, etc.) almost prevents us from taking this poem seriously. It might not be a

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<sup>127</sup> Osip Mandel'shtam, *Stikhotvoreniia*, eds. S. V. Vasilenko & I. L. Freidin, Moscow: Respublika, 1992, 5.

lullaby, but there is something childish about it nonetheless. Here is the poem in its entirety, with a translation by Gregory Freidin:

Дано мне тело — что мне делать с ним,  
Таким единым и таким моим?

За радость тихую дышать и жить,  
Кого, скажите, мне благодарить?

Я и садовник, я же и цветок,  
В темнице мира я не одинок.

На стекла вечности уже легло  
Мое дыхание, мое тепло.

Запечатлеется на нем узор,  
Неузнаваемый с недавних пор.

Пускай мгновения стекает муть—  
Узора милого не зачеркнуть.

A body is given to me—what shall I do with it,  
So whole and so mine?

For the quiet joy of breathing and living,  
Whom, tell me, should I thank?

I am both a gardener and a flower I am, too;  
In the prison of the world, I am not alone.

On the window panes of eternity, settled  
My breathing, my warmth.

A design shall be imprinted on them,  
Unrecognizable since not long ago.

Let the dregs of the moment drip down—

The sweet design cannot be crossed out<sup>128</sup>.

Freidin plays along with the childish, incantatory tone of the poem.<sup>129</sup> He pays particular attention to the last three stanzas, which conjure up the image of a little boy sitting by a window in the middle of winter. He is breathing on the windowpanes, trying to make a circle in the ice—rather like Kay from Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen." Andersen's tale intersects with the poem in yet another way: the windowpanes of "eternity" hold the key to the puzzle Kay has to solve in order to free himself from the grip of the Snow Queen (eternity). Clearly, Freidin has a point here: the fourth stanza strongly resonates with that childhood story of adventure, love, and coming of age, a story Mandel'shtam must certainly have read. But how does it tie in with the rest of the poem? Here Freidin's explanation is less compelling:

But [Kay] was saved by Gerda. The moral: give up ambitions and dreams and instead of chasing after snow queens who promise the world, stick with Grandma and the trusty, if a bit simple, Gerda. However sensible, this was no way to be a poet. The poet—more precisely, the poet of Mandelstam's generation—must do both: breathe a naively warm, ice-melting breath while composing ETERNITY out of the delicate cold crystals. For Mandelstam, who, incidentally, suffered from asthma, breathing often stood for poetry.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> See Gregory Freidin, *A Coat of Many Colors: Osip Mandelstam and His Mythologies of Self-Presentation*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1987, 35.

<sup>129</sup> Leonid Katsis offers another very interesting reading of the poem, situating it in the context of the Judaic tradition, and suggesting that Mandel'shtam figuratively dramatizes there his hesitations between Christian and Judaic traditions, and his attempt to forge his poetic identity out of the difficult union between them. Katsis writes: "Сейчас мы имеем дело со стиховотрением, предшествующим тому периоду самоопределения Мандельштама, которое произошло после крещения в 1911 году и начала нового цикла размышлений поэта, когда развитие темы и образа "миндального посоха" ушло в конец Писания, к книгам поздних пророков. До этого поэту надо было еще дожить. На наш взгляд, стихотворение "Дыхание" стоит рассматривать в рамках, условно говоря, "Моисеева текста." [Here we deal with a poem that directly precedes that period of Mandel'shtam's self-identification which occurred after his baptism in 1911. The poet had yet to live until a new cycle of reflections, when the development of the image of "almond cane" went to the very of the end of the *Scriptures*, to the books of late prophets. We think that the poem "Breathing" should be considered in the context of the so-called "Moses' text." Leonid Katsis, *Osip Mandel'shtam. Iskus iudeistva*, Ierusalim, Moscow: Gescharim, Mosty kul'tury, 2002, 111.

<sup>130</sup> Gregory Freidin, *A Coat of Many Colors*, 36-37.

To complement Freidin's reading of the poem I suggest that we go back to its opening lines, strangely omitted from his analysis. Indeed, the first three words of the poem (in Russian) are particularly misleading, innocently coating an implicit paradox in the soothing monotony of its iambic rhythm. "Dano mne telo" [A body is given to me] implies a situation of giving, of exchange. "A body is given to me" suggests that the body was given, perhaps, as a gift. The scarcity of information conveyed in Russian by the impersonal construction "dano mne telo" makes only one point quite certain. We may not know who the giver was, and what kind of binding symbolic relationship exists between the giver and the poet. But we do know that the body was the subject of an exchange; like chattel, it was traded off for either real or symbolic reward.

Such a transaction covertly—but nevertheless unswervingly—points in one specific direction. The human body as moveable property is the cornerstone of any ideology of slavery, defined precisely as ownership over the body and the exact terms of such bondage. By saying "A body is given to me," Mandel'shtam's poem cautiously probes the idea of the economic exchangeability of the human body. Of course, "body" here may easily be read as a metaphor for life, or poetic talent, or a gift from God. But Mandel'shtam's poem chooses the word "body" out of the whole spectrum of possibilities; and this choice and the connotations it brings with it stay with us in one way or another throughout the poem. My reading picks up on these connotations and situates Mandel'shtam's poem in the context of the capitalist revision and adaptation of the ideology of slavery. I will return to this point, but for now I just want us to keep in mind that the

opening phrase of the poem does, perhaps unintentionally, evoke what under scrutiny appears to be the discourse of chattel slavery.

The second line summons up a different image which, under close inspection, seems incongruent with the idea of giving or exchange in the opening words of the poem. It insists that the speaker's body is "so his"—a rather suspicious statement, given that the transaction in which it was acquired occurred only a line earlier. Importantly, the two images (that of giving the body as a piece of moveable property and that of having it in one's inalienable possession) are opposed to each not only thematically, but also structurally: the first begins the couplet, the second ends it. The implicit contradiction is disguised both by the intentionally naïve, childish tone of the poem, but also by the false continuity which links these two statements. "I was given a body, what am I to do with it now, it being so mine" lulls the reader into believing that the latter statement naturally follows from the former, but it simply does not. The unity and "one-ness" of the body is also emphasized. The second line not only regards the body as inalienable property, but also resists the idea of splintering, of fragmentation, and instead asserts that the body is a whole that cannot be taken away or divided.

The first couplet thus appears to be logically or even grammatically inconsistent, but there may be more to it here than just faulty grammar. Perhaps, Mandel'shtam is attempting to defuse the idea of giving the body as a gift, of regarding the body as moveable property. "So mine" celebrates the constancy of ownership, of possession; it purports to arrest the volatile dynamics of the exchange. The rest of the poem follows suit in resisting the opening statement, since it continually undermines and disputes the implications of "A body was given to me." The second couplet declares that while the exchange may have taken place, the giver is nowhere to be



found, and so the poet owes the debt of gratitude to nobody. It dispenses with the circumstances of the transaction, but also moves away from the rhetoric of ownership over the body. “Body” is replaced with “the quiet joy of living and breathing,” a far more conventional metaphor of being a poet.

The third couplet goes even further. It palpably fragments, divides up the lyric persona in a gesture most reminiscent of the asexual binary fission common to primitive unicellular organisms. Mandel’shtam might well have heard about asexual reproduction (it was discovered in the middle of the nineteenth century). Hence it’s not impossible that the couplet’s meaning—“here’s me, here’s two of me, so that I don’t feel lonely anymore” (cf. I am both a gardener and a flower I am, too; // In the prison of the world, I am not alone)—may have been suggested by the image of an amoeba dividing into two. Importantly for our discussion, the split is not experienced as traumatic, but rather as wholesome and restorative. It assuages and overcomes loneliness, just as two couplets earlier, the poem was dealing with and overcoming the transient nature of the gift.

The fourth couplet startles us again with an inherently oxymoronic figure. “The windowpanes of eternity” implicitly portray glass as a symbol of eternity, blatantly overlooking the proverbial fragility and brittleness of the material. In fact, the story of Gerda and Kay, which according to Freidin informs this poem, is the axiomatic narrative of shattered glass whose splinters may ruin lives. Yet Mandel’shtam’s poem is quite intrepid in its use of these heavily loaded images. It confidently leans on glass without any fear of it breaking—as if the glass were reinforced by the breathing and warmth of the poet. Structurally, the poem does here what it did

in the previous couplets: it takes up images of transience, changeability, and instability and offhandedly imbues them with permanence and unity.

The poem's finale presents us with a similar idea even more straightforwardly, with even greater gusto. The design [uzor]—the trace of the poet's breathing—is imprinted on the frosted windowpane. Both the breathing and the hoarfrost naturally would stand for the transience, impermanence, temporariness of the design. Yet once again out of these most emphatically ephemeral elements there arises the concluding motif of lasting permanence: "Let the dregs of the moment drip down— // The sweet design cannot be crossed out." When the frost melts and the breathing stops, the design, the trace of the breathing on the window, will somehow stay. While Freidin's reading of these lines as a metaphor for poetry certainly makes sense, the structural similarity of this final couplet with the general trend of the poem—constructing the permanent out of the transient—is quite apparent as well.

Overall, this is a poem of overcoming, of stitching together, of solidifying, of resisting the volatile and the transient, and purporting instead to cement, to coagulate it. I read the poem as an attempt to restore the order shattered by the opening phrase, "A body was given to me." The unnerving nature of such a transaction is what Mandel'shtam's text appears to combat and resolve. The poem flees from the transience and convertibility of things, and finds solace in being able to create images of lasting endurance. Of course, "the body that was given" could be interpreted as a synonym for life. Such a reading would warrant us to align this poem with, say, Pushkin's "Дар напрасный, дар случайный, // Жизнь, зачем ты мне дана?" [Pointless gift, random gift, // Life, why are you given to me?]. But such a parallel is not necessarily productive, since the opening line "A body was given to me" sets up a very particular mode of discourse—

that of regarding the body as moveable property. Thus, the body can be and is objectified in Mandel'shtam's poem, whereas life is not and cannot be an object in Pushkin's text. There is very little, or none at all, of the idea of physical, material possession in Pushkin. And yet for Mandel'shtam the idea of body as a tradable good, as chattel almost, is something that his text strives to come to grips with. Life can hardly be so objectified as to appear "so mine and so whole," and yet such a characterization is precisely the central, programmatic question for Mandel'shtam.

Importantly, the sexual connotations of the body are also strangely absent from Mandel'shtam's poem.<sup>131</sup> There is perhaps a trace of the masturbatory, narcissistic gaze in the opening couplet, but it goes no further than that. The lack of the sexual in the poem is particularly noticeable in the context of this humorous rewrite by the Moscow conceptualist Timur Kibirov, who supplies the palpably missing erotic associations:

Дано мне тело. На хрен мне оно,  
коль твоего мне тела не дано?

Коль мне нельзя использовать его  
для ублаженья тела твоего?

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<sup>131</sup> It can also be added that while the semantics of the body and artistic conceptions thereof were at the forefront of Modernism's experiment, Mandel'shtam's poem partakes in none of the three approaches to the artistic representation of the body existing within Russian modernism, as delineated by John Bowlt: "During the 1910s and 1920s three basic emphases flourished within the general artistic conception of the body: firstly, an obsession with the inside of the body and the representation of its inner organs; secondly, a concern with the sensual display and attraction of the outer body; and thirdly, an interpretation of the body as an automaton that extended the machine aesthetic, especially as supported by the constructivists and the purists." John Bowlt, "Body Beautiful: The Artistic Search for a Perfect Physique," in John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich, eds., *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996, 37-38. While Bowlt talks primarily about artistic and not poetic representations of the body, it is still rather bizarre that Mandel'shtam's poem "forgets," as it were, to explore these juicy topics.

Зачем оно, угрюмое, в ночи  
ворочается, мучится, торчит?

Зачем, как ртуть, густа дурная кровь?  
Ах, лучше б быть из племени духов!

Я б дуновеньем легким в тот же миг  
за пазуху и под подол проник!<sup>132</sup>

[A body is given to me. What the hell for,  
if your body is from me withheld?

As long as I am not allowed to use it  
for the blandishments of your body?

Why does it grumble gloomy at night  
twist and turn, agonize and blight?

Why is its bad blood thick as mercury?  
Oh, it would be better to be a phantom!

With a light breath at that very instant  
I'd slip beneath your arm and under the skirt!]<sup>133</sup>

In light of such “eroticization,” the conspicuous lack of any erotic meaning in the original poem is quite astounding. Asexual binary fission, which may be evoked in the third couplet, is very much in line with the overall “Victorian” abstemiousness of the poem. The same couplet’s proclamation that the gardener and the flower are one might have suggested an intertextual parallel with Benjamin’s succinct definition of a prostitute as “the seller and sold in one,”<sup>134</sup> but

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<sup>132</sup> Timur Kibirov, “Дано мне тело. На хрен мне оно” [A body is given to me. What the hell for], [http://lit.peoples.ru/poetry/timur\\_kibirov\\_zapoev/poem\\_17249.shtml](http://lit.peoples.ru/poetry/timur_kibirov_zapoev/poem_17249.shtml)

<sup>133</sup> Translated by Ainsley Morse, with a correction by Jacob Emery.

<sup>134</sup> “Such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish. Such an image is presented by the arcades, which are house no less than street. Such an image is the prostitute—seller and sold in one,” in Walter Benjamin, “Paris,

Mandel'shtam is prudishly not interested in sex here, not at all. The image of the body created in the first couplet and developed throughout the poem is that of an object, just like a car, a house, or a fountain pen. This image of the body, devoid of anything sexual, invites us to think of it as a worldly possession, and it is precisely this perspective on human body that the rest of the poem strives to smother and repress.

In a way, all this brings us back to the question of the lyric response to the ever-increasing isolation and marginalization of poetry in the literary marketplace. We remember how bourgeois prose embraced and dramatized the inevitable “in-between-ness,” fragmentation, and multi-layered compromise engendered by or at least reflected in the precarious, contingent role and place of the bourgeois writer. The economic role of poetry was drastically different: it reverted to a more archaic, but also more resistant and stable model of literary production—that of the writer-amateur protected by an independent source of income from the vicissitudes of the literary market. I argue that Mandel'shtam's “A body was given to me” reenacts—in a very compelling way—this specifically poetic response to the expansion and maturation of literary market and to the kind of compromises entailed by one's involvement with it. The poem powerfully controls an act of exchange by stripping it of any hint of transience and interchangeability. Dispensing with the giver, or any other details of the transaction for that matter, Mandel'shtam's text records the event of giving but peremptorily refuses to acknowledge the temporariness inherent in such an act. Just as the embarrassingly small print runs of modernist poetry editions openly defy the rules of the literary market (recall that Mandel'shtam's

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the Capital of the Nineteenth Century. <Exposé of 1935>,” in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004, 10.

*Kamen'*, where this poem first appeared, was printed in just 300 copies), so too does this poem of Mandel'shtam surreptitiously dispute the logic of exchange. It also infuses matters normally deemed variable and volatile with a dependable permanence, thus mirroring Mandel'shtam's own position of security and independence from the literary market in early twentieth-century Russia.

In a way, what Mandel'shtam does here seems comparable to how Pushkin, in his "When I ramble, pensive, beyond the city," safeguarded the elegy (and kept in check the perceived threat of blurred class boundaries and increased social mobility) by depicting the familial country estate as the inalienable prerequisite of the genre. Pushkin restrains and determinedly controls the perceived danger to his art when he figuratively suggests an essentially Marxist definition of the elegiac as the discourse of the socially privileged in the poem which I analyzed in my third chapter. Seventy years later, Mandel'shtam performs a similar maneuver—in more ways than one.

In Marxist theory, the development and expansion of capitalism is sometimes defined through its relationship with the institution of slavery. Slavery, or ownership over the body, is not rejected by the capitalist economy, but such ownership is realized differently under capitalism. Rather than relying on unmediated, direct ownership enforced by, say, the threat of corporal punishment or death, the capitalist economy relies on mediation to arrive at essentially the same relationship of subjugation and repression. This mediation can be either economic ("wage slavery," the labor "contract"), or social (public recognition, social status, symbolic accolades, honorary titles), or even sexual (bourgeois marriage, ownership over the genitals of

one's spouse,<sup>135</sup> which is a synecdoche of matrimonial possession). As such, ownership over the body is still realized, but in a disguised, oblique, and low profile manner. It is hidden in plain view, so to speak, although something like capital punishment (and the debate about it) makes the existence of such ownership over one's body quite explicit.

I argue that Mandel'shtam's "A body was given to me" provides a figure for this fundamentally evasive capitalist attitude towards ownership over the body in a very forceful way. As if he were a good bourgeois thinker, Mandel'shtam asserts and even exposes the unstable regulation of one's relationship with one's own body under capitalism, casting this relationship in effectively chattel slavery terms. If the human body as moveable property is the cornerstone of any ideology of slavery, then Mandel'shtam's text certainly shows a familiarity with the notion in the first line, "A body is given to me," but, as if intimidated by its own discovery, proceeds to reject it and resist it throughout the rest of the poem. Without divulging the terms of the transaction (the giver, the price, the conditions of ownership and exchange, etc.), the poem turns around and almost pleads with the reader to cast aside that opening statement, frantically mustering images of stability and permanence to counter its effect. In doing so, the poem replays, dramatizes the essentially capitalist anxiety over the idea of ownership over the body.

Thus, the poem does not just mirror the economic circumstances of its production—after all, we normally expect this from virtually any work of art. It also provides a subtle commentary

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<sup>135</sup> "Sexual union in accordance with principle is marriage (matrimonium), that is, the union of two persons of different sexes for lifelong possession of each other's sexual attributes" It is, however, the *mutual* ownership of *each other's* sexual organs, for whatever that's worth." E. Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. Mary J Gregor Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 277.

on one of the central issues of capitalist ideology, the idea and the possibility of ownership over the body. It does so in a characteristically bourgeois manner, with sentimental indecisiveness: it acknowledges the unnerving possibility that human bodies can be thought of as goods, but shies away from its own discovery, and proceeds to cover it up with a rainstorm of images all meant to cancel out the initial transaction. Even the fact that Mandel'shtam substitutes the expected legal or economic discourse with gardening terms in the third couplet is quite meaningful in this context. Instead of saying, as it would naturally follow from the first two couplets dealing with the acquisition and possession of the body, "I am the owner and the owned at the same time," he quickly re-imagines himself as both a gardener and a flower. While such a rendition may seem structurally similar, the connotations it brings about steer the poem away from worrying too much about the idea of the body as moveable property. From Voltaire<sup>136</sup> to Elaine Scarry,<sup>137</sup> the turn to flowers and gardening stands for reconciliatory, compromising perspective which offers solace and pacifying tranquility in the face of one's discreet inability to effect change. Such characteristically bourgeois connotations work quite well for Mandel'shtam's covert agenda here: to reverse and "undo" the disturbance caused by the opening "A body was given to me."

I am not saying that the poem is necessarily a clandestine bourgeois manifesto, or that Mandel'shtam is perforce a bourgeois poet. It can certainly be read as the story of discovering,

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<sup>136</sup> I refer to the famous ending of *Candide*, where the protagonist finally articulates this famous "performative" solution: "This is well said," replied Candide, "but we must cultivate our garden." Francois Voltaire, "Candide", in Francois Voltaire, *Candide, Zadig, and Selected Stories*, trans. Donald M. Frame, New York: The New American Library, 1961, 101.

<sup>137</sup> Elaine Scarry cited flowers and gardening as a prime example of harmonizing, pacifying, and socially-restorative power of beauty in her lectures; Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty: A Graduate Seminar*, Harvard University, English Department, Fall 2004.



recognizing, and understanding a gift of poetry that irrevocably changes the poet, and makes his “breathing” leave permanent designs on the windowpane of eternity. But I believe that my “economic” reading of this poem complements and expands other readings, without encroaching on their territory. If we believe that meanings can co-exist with one another, then such would be the case in this early and seemingly naïve Mandel’shtam poem.

In fact, there is little in Mandel’shtam’s critical writing, his life, or his poetry that might warrant a view of him as bourgeois ideologue, but I would like to quote a short excerpt from a letter he wrote to Viacheslav Ivanov that strangely gestures in that direction:

Excuse me for this outpouring....I spent two weeks in Beatenburg but then decided to spend a few weeks in a sanatorium and went to Montreux. Here I observe a strange contrast: the sacred quiet of the sanatorium, interrupted by the dinner gong, and the call to evening roulette in the casino: *faites vos jeux messieurs! --remarquez messieurs! rien ne va plus!*—the shouts of the croupiers, full of symbolic horror. I have a strange taste: I love the patches of electric light on Lake Lemman, the deferential lackeys, the noiseless flight of the elevator, the marble vestibule of the hotel, the Englishwomen who play Mozart in a half-darkened salon for an audience of two or three official listeners. I love bourgeois, European comfort and am attached to it not only physically, but also emotionally. Perhaps, my poor health is to blame for this? But I never ask myself whether it is good or bad.<sup>138</sup>

I quote this passage from Mandel’shtam’s letter in its entirety to emphasize both the suddenness and the arbitrariness of the transition. Nothing in the rest of the letter either anticipates or picks up on this impromptu outpouring. It stands alone in rather stark contrast to Mandel’shtam’s meditatively reserved ruminations on what he was reading, thinking, planning to

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<sup>138</sup> Osip Mandel’shtam, *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, trans. Jane Gary Harris & Constance Link, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979, 478.

write—very *comme-il-faut* subjects for an aspiring young poet to write about to his elder, more established colleague. The cautiously apologetic tone of this emotional outburst ("Perhaps, my poor health is to blame for this?") bespeaks the uneasiness and discomfort of such a confession. Structurally, this rhetoric of controlled deviation would be more likely in a profession of forbidden love, or a pernicious or embarrassingly acute feeling for another body or idea. Yet the subject of Mandel'shtam's yearning is not only rather unfitting for a modernist poet but also rather bizarre.

### Mandel'shtam After the Revolution

Mandel'shtam's fascination with the bourgeois world becomes much more explicit and undisguised after the 1917 Revolution. Strangely, his essentially conformist "acceptance" of the past bourgeois order of things manifest in his later poetry eventually becomes an essential, dominant model of resistance to Soviet culture and the Soviet regime for generations to come. Much could be said about such the "non-conformism" of the so-called "unofficial culture" of the 1960-1980s, which, I argue, re-appropriates and fashions itself after figures and images found in Mandel'shtam's poetry of the 1920s and 1930s. It would be worth our while then to spend some time with Mandel'shtam's late poetry, so that we can better understand the strange brew of restorative, preservative, and nostalgic resistance that Mandel'shtam bequeathed as an effective *modus operandi* to the later movement.

I suggest we begin with Mandel'shtam's 1931 poem, "С миром державным я был лишь ребячески связан"<sup>139</sup> ["I was only childishly involved with the imperial world," hereafter referred to more literally, as "With the world of power"]:

С миром державным я был лишь ребячески связан,  
Устриц боялся и на гвардейцев глядел исподлобья,  
И ни крупницей души я ему не обязан,  
Как я не мучал себя по чужому подобию.

С важностью глупой, насупившись, в митре бобровой,  
Я не стоял под египетским портиком банка,  
И над лимонной Невою под хруст сторублевый  
Мне никогда, никогда не плясала цыганка.

Чуя грядущие казни, от рева событий мятежных  
Я убежал к nereidam на черное море,  
И от красавиц тогдашних, от тех европейок нежных,  
Сколько я принял смущенья, насады и горя!

Так отчего ж до сих пор этот город довлеет  
Мыслям и чувствам моим по старинному праву?  
Он от пожаров еще и морозов наглет,  
Самолубивый, проклятый, пустой, моложавый.

Не потому ль, что я видел на детской картинке  
Леди Годиву с распущенной рыжею гривой,  
Я повторяю еще про себя, под сурдинку:  
"Леди Годива, прощай! Я не помню, Годива..."

[I was only bound childishly to the world of power,  
I dreaded oysters, viewed guardsmen with suspicion—  
and don't owe a particle of my spirit to it, either,  
however much I hurt myself trying to be someone else.

I never stood under a bank's Egyptian portico,

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<sup>139</sup> Osip Mandel'shtam, *Stikhotvoreniia*, ed. S. V. Vasilenko & I. L. Freidin, Moscow: Respublika, 1992, 90-91.

frowning with dumb importance, in a beaver mitre,  
never, for me, to the crackle of hundred rouble notes,  
did a gipsy girl dance, by the lemon-coloured Neva.

Sensing future executions, I fled from the roar  
of revolutionary events, to the Black Sea nymphs,  
ah, with the beauties of those times—those tender  
European ladies—the confusion, stress, grief I glimpsed!

But why does the city, to this day, still retain  
its ancient rights over my thoughts and feelings?  
Its insolence, with fire and frost, has grown again:  
self-satisfied, condemned, frivolous, un-ageing!

Perhaps, it is because I saw in some picture book, in the nursery,  
Lady Godiva, with a mane of straggling ginger,  
so I still go on repeating to myself, secretly,  
Lady Godiva, farewell...I don't remember, Godiva...<sup>140</sup>

The critical literature on this poem is not extensive. Clare Cavanagh mentions it, along with a number of other poems from the “Moscow Notebooks,” and argues that in all of them Mandel'shtam “struggles to make sense of a past that has become officially irrelevant. What is the relation, these poems ask, between the cultural legacy he had earlier cherished and a new reality that has no need of either his personal or his poetic history? The answer that Mandel'shtam comes up with in 'I'll give it to you' and 'Aleksandr Gertsovich' is discouraging: none whatever, they seem to say.”<sup>141</sup> Gregory Freidin is even more economical when he off-handedly dismisses the very palpable ambivalence and hesitation of “With the world of power,” noting that it “helps to explain why he [Mandel'shtam] found it necessary in 1931 to reaffirm his pledge (indeed a spell—*Chur*, 'Guard me') of allegiance to the fourth estate, to insist on his

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<sup>140</sup> This translation is taken from <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Russian/MoreMandelstam.htm>

<sup>141</sup> Clare Cavanagh, *Osip Mandel'shtam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 224.

fundamental alienation from the Imperial world that had reared him, his sentimental attachments notwithstanding.”<sup>142</sup> My own reading of the poem is going to dispute Freidin's last statement. I intend to demonstrate how Mandel'shtam's poem not only does not “insist on his fundamental alienation from the Imperial world,” but instead relates to us—rather univocally—the manner of his involvement with that world<sup>143</sup>.

The poem consists of a series of negations, stitched one after another, to persuade the reader that the poet in fact wants to affirm, surreptitiously, what he is so conspicuously denying. The first line already suggests this duality of meaning, since the manner of the poet's involvement with the imperial world—“ребячески” [childishly]—can be understood in at least two exclusive ways. “Ребячески” may be a temporal modifier, indicating that his involvement with the “old regime” was limited to the poet's childhood. But it also may bespeak the actual nature of the involvement—infantile, jejune. This second possibility is more in line with the overall thrust of the poem: to deny any serious connection between the poet and the enumerated attractions of the old pre-1917 Russia. Yet the possibility of such a bluntly temporal reading of “ребячески” clandestinely prefigures the turnabout in the course of the poem. It works to undo the stated fickleness of the poet's involvement with the imperial world, preparing the reader to look for further clues.

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<sup>142</sup> Gregory Freidin, *A Coat of Many Colors*, 231.

<sup>143</sup> Another interesting reading of the poem is offered by Joseph Brodsky. He reads this poem in the context of Mandel'shtam's earlier “Золотистого меда струя из бутылки стекла,” written in 1917 in Crimea in Vera Sudeikina's album. Brodsky argues that “С миром державным..” is a cryptic love narrative which evokes the earlier poem and conjures up the image of its heroine (Vera Sudeikina) in the final stanza, in the guise of Lady Godiva (Joseph Brodsky, “S mirom derzhavnym ia byl lish' rebiacheski sviazan,” in Robin Aizlewood & Diana Myers, eds, *Stoletie Mandel'shtama: materialy simpoziuma*, Tenafly, NJ: Hermitage, 1994, 9-17).

The guardsmen in the second line mostly likely marched into the poem from Mandel'shtam's earlier autobiographical piece, *The Noise of Time*, where we read:

Here on the green roadway over which no vehicles ever passed, the marine guards held their drills, and the brass kettledrums and the drums shook the waters of the quiet canal. I liked the physical selection of the men—they were all taller than the normal height—and my nurse completely shared my tastes. Thus we selected one sailor, the "black mustache," as we called him, came regularly to look at him personally, and, when we had picked him out of the formation, would not take our eyes off him till the end of the exercises. And I say now, without a moment's hesitation, that at the age of seven or eight all this—the whole massif of Petersburg, the granite and wood-paved quarters, all the gentle heart of the city with its overflow of squares, its shaggy parks, its islands of monuments, the caryatids of the Hermitage, the mysterious Millionnaya Street, where there were no passers-by and where only one small grocery store had wormed itself in among the marble, but especially the General Staff Arch, the Senate Square, and all Dutch Petersburg I regarded as something sacred and festive.<sup>144</sup>

Incidentally, the chapter from which this quotation comes is titled "Childish Imperialism" [Ребяческий империализм]—a title that brings out yet another nuance of meaning in the epithet "ребяческий." In "ребяческий империализм" the modifier works to excuse and muffle the gravity of Mandel'shtam's fascination with imperial culture. Yet the poet's admiration for the Imperial Guards is nonetheless far more unequivocal here in prose (perhaps because he felt that chapter title itself served as his excuse). He unabashedly dubs the whole panorama of Imperial Petersburg as "sacred and festive," just as he had guiltily confessed his attraction to the "sacredness" of bourgeois European comforts in the letter to Viacheslav Ivanov.

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<sup>144</sup> Osip Mandelstam, *The Noise of Time*, trans. Clarence Brown (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1986), 72-73

While in his autobiography Mandelshtam is unswervingly in love with Imperial Russia, in verse he continues to shy away from any such compromising ties. But the very structure of negation betrays Mandel'shtam again in the second stanza. Here, the poet resorts to what appears to be a German-like syntax. He puts the formal negation towards the end of the utterance, in the line that follows the negated statement:

STATEMENT С важностью глупой, насупившись, в митре бобровой,  
NEGATION Я **не стоял** под египетским портиком банка,  
STATEMENT И над лимонной Невою под хруст сторублевый  
NEGATION Мне **никогда, никогда не плясала** цыганка.

While such syntax may work quite naturally in German, it certainly comes across as being forced or even clumsy in Russian. It also does not help that Mandel'shtam's denials are couched in such concrete, sensuous details. We might have believed that he knew nothing about banks or gypsies, but then how does he know about all those beaver mitres and Egyptian porticoes, those lemon-colored Nevas and crackling hundred-ruble bills? It's like someone who answers a knock on the door by saying "Nobody's here": Mandel'shtam divulges his knowledge of imperial culture and his involvement with it just as he's protesting that he never ever knew it.

The next stanza lulls us into overlooking a disguised non sequitur. Indeed, the first two stanzas have already exposed and detailed the poet's "non-participating participation" in the life of the *ancien régime*. The third now follows up chronologically (the poet flees to the South before the coming Revolution) and, ostensibly, thematically—but the seam is rather crudely sewn. The poet's encounters with women who made him suffer so much sexual frustration and humiliation ("и от красавиц тогдашних, от тех европейнок нежных // сколько я принял насады, смущения, и горя") are presumably supposed to reinforce his outsider status in the

bourgeois world. Just as the world of banks and Gypsies spurned the uncannily observant and perceptive poet, so too did those “tender European-clad women” in the South (in Crimea). Not only is this account not entirely true—one of those tender “Europeans” was Marina Tsvetaeva’s sister Anastasia<sup>145</sup>, who would cook up specially unleavened kashas every morning for Mandel’shtam’s chronically upset stomach.<sup>146</sup> One could also note that being spurned, rejected, or even humiliated by women whom he labels “European” hardly amounts to being a complete stranger to the world where those women abide. In fact, the very opposite is true. The frustrations inflicted on the poet, no matter how bitter they might have been, signify that he and those “европейки” belong in fact to the same social world. Again, the poem and the poet contradict themselves. Their disavowal of participation implicitly testifies to their involvement.

In the fourth stanza there comes the heralded turnabout. The poet’s fascination with bourgeois culture is now localized. “Этот город” [this city] firmly points to Petersburg, the former capital, in spite of the glaring lack of any elucidating details. It can’t be Moscow, since

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<sup>145</sup> Although Joseph Brodsky believes that it was Vera Sudeikina who was the key prototype for these tender Europeans. See Joseph Brodsky, “S mirom derzhavnym ia byl lish’ rebiacheski sviazan,” in Robin Aizlewood & Diana Myers, eds, *Stoletie Mandel’shtama: materialy simpoziuma*, Tenafly, NJ: Hermitage, 14.

<sup>146</sup> “В быту у братьев все не ладилось, они часто болели, особенно Осип. Был на диете: ему бывали воспрещены обеды в береговой кофейне «Бубны», где встречалась знать Коктебеля за шашлыками, чебуреками, сидро и пивом, и как-то само собой вышло, что Осип стал в смысле каш и спиртовок моим вторым сыном, старшим, а об Александре стала заботиться Лиза, сестра Сони Парнок. Мы с ней пересмеивались дружески-иронически над своей ролью и весело кивали друг другу. Серьезных бесед я не помню. Осип был величаво-шутлив, свысока любезен — и всегда на краю обиды, так как никакая заботливость не казалась ему достаточной и достаточно почтительно выражаемой. Он легко раздражался. И, великолепно читая по просьбе стихи, пуская, как орла, свой горделивый голос, даря слушателям (казавшуюся многим вычурной) ритмическую струю гипнотически повелительной интонации, он к нам снисходил, не веря нашему пониманию, и похвале внимал — свысока.” Anastasia Tsvetaeva, *Vospominania.V.2. 1911-1922*. Moscow: Boslen, 2008, 420. And later: “Однако у дома Мандельштам сказал, что ему не хочется идти кушать одну кашу, а другого нельзя, я тотчас же предложила сварить ему кашу дома, он согласился. Я пошла домой, но не оказалось молока; не говоря ничего, прячась, через сад, забыв от усталости, я быстро пошла в кофейню, принесла молока и сварила подопечному кашу.” Ibid, 426.



we know that Mandel'shtam only visited there.<sup>147</sup> But even if we disregard the biographical evidence, the transfer of the state capital from Petersburg to Moscow in 1918 firmly tied the former to the vanished glory of the bygone empire in the cultural imagination of Mandel'shtam's generation. We know what city Mandel'shtam is talking about in the fourth stanza, and we also know the answer to the question he is busy formulating. "But why does the city, to this day, still retain // its ancient rights over my thoughts and feelings?"—Well, of course we know why: you just told us! You were so desperately in love with it and its imperial façade, and now you're too embarrassed to even talk plainly about your feelings, opting instead to put on the more becoming (for a modernist poet) mask of a casual observer. It certainly takes poetic skill to maintain, to prolong the intense indecisiveness and ambivalence of such discourse. In a way, Mandel'shtam effectively warps two sides of something (as, say, Pushkin does in his *Bronze Horseman*) into one apparently coherent and homogenous narrative. But such poetic acrobatics will not fool anyone. Mandel'shtam's desire for the "world of power" is meticulously camouflaged, but grows ever stronger in such a partially closeted environment.

The intense row of adjectives characterizing Petersburg in the fourth stanza—  
"самолюбивый, проклятый, пустой, молодежавый" [self-satisfied, condemned, frivolous, un-  
ageing]—evoke in number but also in their inculpatory-mesmerized, swearingly-awestruck

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<sup>147</sup> And again it was Marina Tsvetaeva who was his guide there. Mandel'shtam commemorated his visit in his 1916 "На развалинах, уложенных соломой." Osip Mandel'shtam, *Stikhotvoreniia*, ed. S. V. Vasilenko & I. L. Freidin, Moscow: Respublika, 1992, 39.

connotations a line (or, several lines actually) from a poem Mandel'shtam will write three years later, on the death of Andrei Bely<sup>148</sup>:

На тебя надевали тиару — юрода колпак,  
Бирюзовый учитель, мучитель, властитель, дурак!

[They put a crown on your head—a holy fool's cap,  
Turquoise teacher, torturer, sovereign, dunce!]

Mandel'shtam was a keen admirer of Bely, and yet as he reflects on Bely's death he resolutely shuns the panegyric mode. In Mandel'shtam the intensity of the emotion precludes any stable epithets, and is only escalated by incongruity. If those lines from the 1934 poem evince palpitating emotion, so do the seemingly accusatory epithets Mandel'shtam chose to “slander” Petersburg.

The last stanza breaks away from the discourse of closeted fascination with the old regime, and summons up the image of Lady Godiva—an eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon noblewoman who, according to legend, rode naked through the streets of Coventry in order to save its citizens from her husband's oppressive taxation. A later version of this legend also

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<sup>148</sup> .” Osip Mandel'shtam, *Stikhotvoreniia*, ed. S. V. Vasilenko & I. L. Freidin, Moscow: Respublika, 1992, 124-125. Also, in the same poem:

Как снежок на Москве заводил кавардак гоголек:  
Непонятен-понятен, невятен, запутан, легок...

Собиратель пространства, экзамены сдавший птенец,  
Сочинитель, щегленок, студентик, студент, бубенец...

introduces the figure of “Peeping Tom,” who tried to watch her ride through town (disobeying her injunction to stay inside and lock window and door), and was struck blind in punishment.

Mandel’shtam may have known about Lady Godiva from the famous painting by the British Pre-Raphaelite artist John Collier. The painting depicts Lady Godiva on horseback, in profile, with her long loose curly hair accentuating more than concealing her nakedness. It was quite a sensational work of art in its time, but it is not just Godiva’s nakedness which is so captivatingly transgressive here. A painting like this one—on a subject so permeated with the theme of voyeurism, of spying and peeping at an object of desire that is so strangely empowered (in spite of or perhaps because of the lack of clothing)—can’t help but make one think of an easy slide from Peeping Tom to the artist, or the viewer. This painting invites us to try on Tom’s guise, to experience for ourselves what it would be like to stare at the naked Godiva riding through the town.

Such “shapeshifting” comes with a difference, of course: there is no punishment or retribution for us as we gape at the painting in the quiet of the Herbert Art Gallery in Coventry, or at a reproduction in a fine arts book, or on the computer screen. We can examine the painting all day long, zoom in on the details—there is no risk of being struck blind, or contracting any other disease for that matter. And yet the original legend as it has come down to us is really a narrative of taboo-breaking, of gazing at the forbidden and suffering punishment for it. Like a number of other stories with similar motifs,<sup>149</sup> the key here is the sudden empowerment of a

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<sup>149</sup> In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Actaeon spies on Diana in a forest and is then transformed into a stag, and hunted down by his own dogs. Gyges, in Herodotus’s account of the history of Lydia, is similarly punished for staring at the queen when she is naked.

"helpless" object of desire, and even its transformation into a retributive agent. The punishment inflicted on the Peeping Tom figure retroactively upends the whole story, inverting the terms of engagement. It is now the beholder of the beautiful object who is in trouble, not the object itself. The object, though exposed, remains completely out of harm's way: instead it is the sheltered, cautious observer who is actually discovered and then punished. Thus, viewing becomes not a safe, passive, innocuous activity (as the protagonist might have thought), but a perilous trespass. Even more importantly, the observed is not just a compliant, will-less object—it actively resists the gaze in the act of punishing the onlooker.

The last stanza in the poem intimates that Mandel'shtam was actually aware of the subtle changes in the power dynamic manifest in the painting as compared with the original story. He begins to speak about guilt and requital, and implicitly casts himself as the Peeping Tom. The ensuing punishment, the poet insinuates, was what the first four stanzas were all about. But rather than being struck blind, Mandel'shtam implies, he was subjected to an unceasing, harrowing love/hate relationship with the world of the old empire. True enough, he positions himself throughout the poem as a reluctant, dispassionate observer rather than a greedy epicurean aficionado when he describes the degree of his involvement (and tries to remove himself from the scene even further via emphatic negation, “никогда, никогда” [never, never]). But the ending of the poem evinces an aching realization that “just looking” may implicate (and remembering the historical context of the 1930s and Mandel'shtam's own biography—may incriminate) him just as much if not more than an affable, consensual participation. Just as Tom

was punished for “just looking”—which turned out to be a punishable offense, so does Mandel’shtam come to regard his own affair with the old empire. It all might have innocently started with merely “viewing the guardsmen with suspicion,” but in the end the poet realizes that it was to be a disastrous, self-destructive yet essential transgression. Perhaps, in yet another sense, the omitted/expected blindness may be a figure for a “curse of obfuscation,” a condemnation to the unintentionally convoluted, jumbled manner of expression which Mandel’shtam makes use of in this and in many of his other late poems. The inability to speak clearly, unfalteringly, without constant reliance on unfinished, contradictory tropes—this is a kind of poetic “blindness” indeed.

To reiterate, I argue that Mandel’shtam’s “With the world of power” is a multi-layered document of a troubled yet deep relationship between the poet and the world of the old empire. Far from “pledging allegiance to the fourth estate and insisting on his fundamental alienation from the Imperial world,” as Gregory Freidin would have us believe, Mandel’shtam here evinces a slow, progressive realization of his intricate involvement with the glitter and splendor of the vanquished empire. He might have acted as a mere observer—but as he tells us in the end, just observing may be quite fatefully binding as well.

I will turn now to what is probably Mandel’shtam’s most celebratory poem commemorating pre-1917 Russia, “I drink to military asters.”

Я пью за военные астры, за все, чем корили меня:  
За барскую шубу, за астму, за желчь петербургского дня.

За музыку сосен савойских, полей елисейских бензин,  
За розы в кабине ролс-ройса, за масло парижских картин.

Я пью за бискайские волны, за сливок альпийских кувшин,  
За рыжую спесь англичанок и дальних колоний хинин,

Я пью, но еще не придумал, из двух выбирая одно:  
Душистое асти-спуманте иль папского замка вино... <sup>150</sup>

[I drink to military asters, to all that they've scolded me for,  
To a noble fur coat, to asthma, to a bilious Petersburg day,

To the music of Savoy pine trees, to benzine in the Champs-Élysées,  
To the roses inside of Rolls Royces, to the Parisian pictures' oil paint.

I drink to the waves of Biscay, to cream in Alpine jugs,  
To British ladies' ruddy grandeur, to quinine from distant colonies,

I drink, but I've not decided which of the two I will pick:  
A sparkling asti spumante or a *Chateauneuf-du-Pape*.<sup>151</sup>

This poem has attracted considerable critical attention, especially recently. Alexander Zholkovsky wrote about it in an early and effulgently structuralist article, in which he sought to identify the key semantic “инварианты” [invariants] that organize and control Mandel'shtam's poem. While the essay appears rather cumbersome (as the author himself confesses in a later footnote, even the poet's widow, Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, was astounded by the earnest meticulousness of his approach), Zholkovsky does offer a few useful insights into the poem's structure. He points out that the poet does not have any wine for his toast. Zholkovsky writes:

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<sup>150</sup> Osip Mandel'shtam, *Stikhotvoreniia*, ed. S. V. Vasilenko & I. L. Freidin, Moscow: Respublika, 1992, 95.

<sup>151</sup> The translation is from Clare Cavanagh, *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition*, 249.

Об отсутствии вина в тексте прямо не говорится — оно выносится в подтекст. Этому способствует такой способ изложения фабулы, при котором текст стихотворения совпадает с текстом тоста (перволичная форма без описания декораций извне; это возможно благодаря словесному характеру программной части тоста). В рамках же самой речи от первого лица выбран наиболее двусмысленный способ опровержения — некоторая противоречивость делаемых заявлений (*пью, но...*).<sup>[37]</sup> На языковом уровне эта противоречивость передана также достаточно неопределенными — ритмико-интонационными — средствами: 7-я строка — единственная, где формула *Я пью...* обрывается (запятой и противительным союзом) уже на 2-м слоге. Крайне осторожным является и предвстие предстоящей 'утраты' — та иллюзорность обладания, в духе которой выдержано перечисление 'ценностей'.<sup>152</sup>

Zholkovsky notes here that the lack of wine is manifested “subtextually.” Thus, it implicitly adds “wine” to the list of things Mandel’shtam is recollecting and lamenting here. In the end, it also makes the poetic toast into a failed performative utterance, since the poet lacks or loses his glass of wine, a prerequisite in this genre.

I cannot say that Zholkovsky’s reading of this poem strikes me as particularly compelling. For one, he impatiently glosses over the palpably vicarious nature of Mandel’shtam’s involvement with many of the symbols or artifacts of the old regime that he is nonetheless toasting to. Indeed, what I find rather absurd about the poem is the grotesque agglomeration of persons, objects, and places from pre-1917 Russia and the pre-revolutionary world as a whole, some of which Mandel’shtam could never have known firsthand. Mandel’shtam did spend time in France and Germany, but he never visited Spain (“бискайские волны” [the waves of Biscay]), nor England (“рыжая спесь англичанок” [British ladies' ruddy

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<sup>152</sup> Zholkovskii, Aleksandr. “‘Ja p’iu za voennye astry: poeticheskii avtoportret Osipa Mandel’shtama,” found at <http://www-bcf.usc.edu/~alikh/rus/ess/bib31.htm>

grandeur]), although he certainly might have met British women. And then, “quinine from distant colonies” is likely as distant, if not as far-fetched as it can possibly be in the context of the Russian empire. Indeed, Russia never had colonies in the same sense that many European powers did. While some contemporary scholars do speak about so-called “internal colonization”<sup>153</sup> of, say, the Caucasus or the Central Asia, these Russian “colonies” have been made contiguous, inalienable part of the Russian empire itself. Mandel’shtam is obviously speaking here about those colonies Russia never had, and he himself had never visited or given much thought to. The emblematic vicariousness of this phrase stands in a very sharp contrast with the deep-lying privatization of experience in Mandel’shtam’s “With the World of Power” The biographical backbone which structured that earlier poem is palpably lacking here.

Other elements of the old regime Mandel’shtam is toasting to here do have firmer ground in his poetics. The noble fur coat naturally leads us again back to the penultimate chapter of *The Noise of Time* (“В не по чину барственной шубе” [In a Fur Coat above One's Station]). Zholkovsky in his article does an excellent job tracking down all the inter-textual references in the poem, situating it in the larger context of Mandel’shtam’s oeuvre. But the staggering ease with which the poet flits to and from the vicarious in this poem suggests an altogether different kind of rhetoric structure. The list that Mandel’shtam compiles in this poem is organized connotationally rather than referentially. The heavily-montaged, hectically scattered alignment of the poem makes one think of it as almost a kind of commercial for the old regime. It smacks of

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<sup>153</sup> The term and the concept was suggested in Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011.



the culture industry (to borrow a term from Adorno and Horkheimer<sup>154</sup>) as it basks in the unnecessarily loose, imprecise images of the past it is recreating. In a way, just as Mayakovsky could ply and twist Soviet ideology in his famous line, “Говорим Ленин. Подразумеваем партия” [We say, Lenin. We mean, the Party]<sup>155</sup>, so does Mandel’shtam here flutteringly ignore logic and composition when he utters, in effect, “Говорим, военные астры. Подразумеваем, барскую шубу” [We say, military asters. We mean, a noble fur coat].

I would like to turn now to our next Mandel’shtam’s poem, “Ленинград” [Leningrad].

Я вернулся в мой город, знакомый до слез,  
До прожилок, до детских припухлых желез.

Ты вернулся сюда - так глотай же скорей  
Рыбий жир ленинградских речных фонарей.

Узнавай же скорее декабрьский денек,  
Где к зловещему дегтю примешан желток.

Петербург! Я еще не хочу умирать.  
У тебя телефонов моих номера.

Петербург! У меня еще есть адреса,  
По которым найду мертвецов голоса.

Я на лестнице черной живу, и в висок  
Ударяет мне вырванный с мясом звонок.

И всю ночь напролет жду гостей дорогих,  
Шевеля кандалами цепочек дверных.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> The concept of “culture industry” was put forth in Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

<sup>155</sup> Vladimir Maiakovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, V. 6, Moscow, 1957, 267.

<sup>156</sup> Osip Mandel’shtam, *Stikhotvoreniia*, ed. S. V. Vasilenko & I. L. Freidin, Moscow: Respublika, 1992, 89.

I returned to my city that I know like my tears,  
Like my veins, like childhood's swollen glands

You've come back here, so swallow at once  
The cod liver oil of Leningrad's river lamps,

Recognize, right away, the brief December day,  
Egg yolk commingled with ominous tar.

Petersburg! I'm not yet ready to die!  
You've still got my telephone numbers.

Petersburg! I still have the addresses  
Where I can call on the speech of the dead.

I live on a back staircase, and the clapper  
Yanked out with flesh hits me in the temple,

And all night through I wait for precious guests,  
Rattling like shackles the chains on the doors.

This rather transparent (by the standards of the late Mandel'shtam anyway) poem<sup>157</sup> formulates and develops several key ideas that were destined to become instrumental in the cultural and ideological formation of the underground culture. The poem ostensibly tells a story of homecoming after a prolonged absence. The old, pre-Revolutionary Petersburg that the poet viewed as the epitome of his fascination “with the world of power” in that earlier poem has been

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<sup>157</sup> The poet's widow remembers the circumstances of its unforeseen publication in 1931: “..сильно распространилось в списках, и его, видимо, решили легализовать печатаньем. В дни, когда оно напечаталось, мы жили на Тверском бульваре, насквозь простукаченные и в совершенно безвыходном положении. Писались стихи в Ленинграде, куда мы поехали после Москвы — на месяц, в дом отдыха ЦЕКУБУ. Это тогда Тихонов объяснил О. М., чтобы мы поскорее убирались из Ленинграда — “как на фронте”... Какой-то дружелюбный человек, представитель “Известий”, предупреждал О. М.: поменьше читайте эти стихи, а то они в самом деле придут за вами.” Nadezhda Mandel'shtam, *Kniga tretia*, Paris: YMCA-Press, 1972, 146-148.

replaced by the new Soviet Leningrad. Petersburg is explicitly addressed in lines six and eight, but the first lines already introduce an attempt at recognition, referring to the city as the city of the poet's childhood: "знакомый до слез" (literally, known "to tears," which must be the tears that Mandel'shtam shed in his early childhood as all children do), "до детских припухлых желез" ("to the childish-swollen glands"—the swollen glands of a common childhood illness<sup>158</sup>). Childhood is thus metaphorically conjoined with the city itself since they both, it is implied, have perished.

Instead, the poet is "greeted" by the new city of Leningrad which addresses him in the third line, "Ты вернулся сюда—так глотай же скорей // Рыбий жир ленинградских речных фонарей" [You've come back here, so swallow at once // the cod liver oil of Leningrad's river lamps]. As if acknowledging the poet's quest for the city he had once known as a child, the new Leningrad mocks the poet by asking him to recognize and accept the new, altered, Sovietized attributes of childhood it now displays: the cod liver oil of river lamps (cod liver oil is a remedy prescribed for various childhood ailments) and the egg yolk mixed with tar. This latter image may be a variation on the proverbial "ложка дегтя в бочке меда" ("a spoonful of tar in the barrel of honey"—in other words, a little nuisance that spoils something good, like a homecoming), with egg yolk—also yellow—replacing honey. The new Leningrad asks the poet to "recognize" the new reality, and even provides some helpful clues, but this gesture works to

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<sup>158</sup> Nancy Pollak insightfully suggests that the salience (swollen glands), and the partially impaired vision brought about by this illness may also be "the distorted vision that accompanies the creative state" for Mandel'shtam. Nancy Pollak, *Mandel'shtam the Reader*, Baltimore, MD and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1995, 146.

the opposite effect, forcibly depriving the poet of the memories of childhood evoked in lines one and two. It is the contiguity of images coupled with the change of allegiance that becomes so devastating: the very memories of childhood and memory itself are being violated, taken out, metonymically replaced, and destroyed.

The poet apostrophizes the old Petersburg in line seven as an act of resistance to such violence. This apostrophe implies that the old Petersburg was an altogether different geographic entity, that it has been removed from the present not only in time, but also in space. The poet's old phone numbers, as well as the address book he still has with him, refer to a different locality. This other locality could not have been subsumed by the new Soviet Leningrad because—we are given to understand—it is the land of the dead. “Петербург” [Petersburg] is almost alliterated with “умирать” [to die] in line seven, and then with “мертвецов” [of the dead] in line ten if we recall that 'm' and 'p' differ only by the nasality of the former, sharing the place of articulation in Russian phonetics:

Петербургу [PiterBuRg] – умирать [uMiRat'] – мертвецов [MiRtvetsov]

Even “номера” [“phone numbers”], a part of that other geography, are also alliterated with Petersburg and dying: “номера” [noMiRa].

I argue that this apostrophe to imperial Petersburg functions as a cunning poetic response to the very real threat of annihilation posed by the new Soviet reality. But the old Petersburg has been shifted into another time and space, hence rescued from the imminent danger of being devoured by Soviet Leningrad. And when the poet returns to the new Leningrad, he is a changed man, who has parted with the sentimental attachments besetting him in the opening lines of the poem.

Such “poetic rescues” as this will become a far more common trope in the years to come. As I will show in my next chapter, Viktor Krivulin performs an even bolder maneuver in his famous poem “Вопрос к Тютчеву” (“A Question for Tiutchev,” 1970), in which he metaphorically foregrounds the condition and the social and economic practices of the underground literature of the 1960s-1980s.

## **Chapter 4: The (Black) Market of Russian Poetry: Underground**

### **Poetry of the 1960s-1980s**

Viktor Krivulin's "Вопрос к Тютчеву" ("A Question for Tiutchev") is a very interesting specimen of the underground literature of the 1970s, quite illustrative of the underground literary situation. I will be doing a close reading of the poem, and then commenting on the poem's significance for underground culture. Here is the poem in its entirety:

#### Вопрос к Тютчеву

Я Тютчева спрошу, в какое море гонит  
Обломки льда советский календарь,  
И если время - Божья тварь  
То почему слезы хрустальной не проронит?  
И почему от страха и стыда  
Темнеет большеглазая вода,  
Тускнеют очи на иконе?

Пред миром неживым в растерянности, в смуте,  
В духовном омуте, как рыбы безголос,  
Ты - взгляд ослепшего от слез,  
С тяжелым блеском, тяжелее ртути..  
Я Тютчева спрошу, но мысленно, тайком:  
Каким сказать небесным языком  
Об умирающей минуте?

Мы время отпоем, и высохшее тельце  
Накроем бережно нежнейшей пеленой...  
Родства к истории родной  
Не отрекайся, милый, не надейся,  
Что бред веков и тусклый плен минут  
Тебя минует - видишь ли, вернут  
Добро исконному владельцу.

И полчища теней из прожитого всеу,  
Заполнят улицы и комнаты битком.  
И чем дышать, у Тютчева спрошу я,  
И сожалеть- о ком?<sup>159</sup>  
[Question for Tiutchev

I'll ask Tiutchev into what sea  
the Soviet calendar drives fragments of ice,  
and if time is God's creature,  
then why does it not drop a crystal tear?  
and why from terror and disgrace  
does the large-eyed water dim and fade,  
the icon's orbs grow vague?

At a loss before the unliving world, ill at ease,  
in a spiritual maelstrom, like a fish voiceless,  
you are the gaze blinded by tears,  
with a heavy luster, heavier than mercury...  
I'll ask Tiutchev, but in my thoughts, secretly -  
in what heavenly language can I speak  
of the dying minute?

We sing the burial of time, and the dried-out little body  
we cover carefully with softest swaddling...  
your relation to our own dear history -  
don't deny it, dearest, and don't hope  
that the madness of centuries and the dull spell of minutes  
will pass you by - believe it or not, those goods  
will be returned to their long-patient owner.  
And hordes of shades from the life lived in vain  
will fill up the rooms and teem in the streets...  
And - what to breathe? - I'll ask Tiutchev,  
and whom to pity?]<sup>160</sup>

Despite a relative growth of interest in the poetry of Viktor Krivulin following his  
unfortunate death from lung cancer in 2000, all the most influential academic publications on his

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<sup>159</sup> Viktor Krivulin, *Stikhi*, vol. 1, Leningrad, Paris: Beseda, 1988, 22-23.

<sup>160</sup> Translated by Ainsley Morse.

poetry can still be easily reviewed within a single paragraph. To begin with, one should mention Stephanie Sandler's article "A Poet Living in the Big City: Viktor Krivulin, Among Others,"<sup>161</sup> which - among other things - brings under critical scrutiny his uncannily prophetic "Когда придет пора менять названия" ("When there comes a time to change the names," early 1980s), a poem which confidently anticipates the coming of Perestroika-inspired changes from the wilderness of the 70s stagnation. Clint Walker's "The Spirits of the Leningrad Underground: Viktor Krivulin's Communion with Russian Modernism,"<sup>162</sup> a brilliant study of Krivulin's perhaps most oft-quoted poem "Пью вино архаизмов" ("I am drinking the wine of archaisms," 1973), tracks down the thick layer of its literary references—primarily, to Mandel'shtam and Briusov. A number of Russian publications have also appeared recently, often written by friends of the poet, and often being more obituaries than critical essays (to name just a few: Mikhail Sheinker's "...Grivastaia krivaia...Viktora Krivulina,"<sup>163</sup> Olga Sedakova's "Pamiati Viktora Krivulina,"<sup>164</sup> Boris Ivanov's "Viktor Krivulin – poet rossiiskogo renessansa,"<sup>165</sup> Sergei Zavialov's "Tishina i gospodstvo bessmertia"<sup>166</sup>), complement the picture, but still leave quite a few blank spots in the poetic biography of one of the key figures in the Leningrad underground.

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<sup>161</sup> Stephanie Sandler, "A Poet Living in the Big City: Viktor Krivulin, Among Others." In *Poetics. Self. Place: Essays to Honor Anna Lisa Crone*, N. Boudreau and C. O'Neil, eds., Columbus, Ohio: Slavica, 2007, 1-19.

<sup>162</sup> Clint Walker, "The Spirits of the Leningrad Underground: Viktor Krivulin's Communion with Russian Modernism." In *Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 43, no. 4, 1999, 674-698.

<sup>163</sup> Mikhail Sheinker, "...Grivastaia krivaia...Viktora Krivulina." In *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 4, 2001, 230-235.

<sup>164</sup> Ol'ga Sedakova, "Pamiati Viktora Krivulina." In *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 6, 2001, 236-242.

<sup>165</sup> Boris Ivanov, "Khronika sovremennoi literatury. Viktor Krivulin – poet rossiiskogo renessansa. 1944-2001." In *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 4, 2004, 270-285.

<sup>166</sup> Sergei Zavialov, "Tishina i gospodstvo bessmertia." In *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 6, 2001, 249-252.



One of the problems in studying the underground is the uncertainty of its literary contexts. For example, quite often critics examine the literature of the underground as a response to, a projection and/or restart of the Silver Age. While this is certainly true to some extent, one should not forget the uneasy relationship between the generations of the underground, and the different ways in which they appropriated and recovered the obliterated Silver Age. If Brodsky and his generation unequivocally accepted the primacy of the Silver Age stars—Akhmatova, Mandel'shtam, Pasternak, and Tsvetaeva, the following generations developed a much more ambiguous attitude towards them. Even on the personal level: both Krivulin and Shvarts had only a quite superficial acquaintance with Akhmatova, and neither of them had the kind of tender and humble attachment to her that Brodsky and many in his circle did.<sup>167</sup> For Krivulin's generation, Akhmatova was perhaps a genius and maybe a living classic, but already alien, foreign, interfering rather than supportive. While she could not be discarded or rejected because of her "saintly" status, she was "silently ignored." She "belonged" to Brodsky and the "neo-classicists," surprisingly becoming much more of an "archaist" and a literary adversary for the poets of the 1970s. Krivulin's generation took a much stronger interest in other figures of the Silver Age, such as I. Annensky, V. Ivanov, M. Kuzmin, and V. Khodasevich. The earlier generation of the underground (Roald Mandel'shtam, Leonid Aronzon) was also an important beacon for Krivulin's generation. Krivulin wrote his undergraduate thesis on Annensky<sup>168</sup> and

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<sup>167</sup> In fact, the appearance of Shvarts in Akhmatova's house in Komarovo caused a scandal, when Shvarts, then fifteen, called Akhmatova, almost "en face", "старухой" [old woman]—and then was immediately kicked out. Mikhail Sheinker, private interview, 1990.

<sup>168</sup> Mikhail Sheinker, private interview, May 2013.

later was very much influenced by Ivanov.<sup>169</sup> The underground of the 1970s was, in a way, almost “an underground within an underground,” a fact that needs to be taken into account when discussing this period.

Among other contexts which in turn became quite influential in the 1970s was that of literary theory and, specifically, the theory of versification as it had been developed by the Russian Formalists. Poets of the 1970s—and this is more than true in the case of Krivulin—were very well versed in theory, and “understood” no less that “felt” the mechanics of poetic production. The writings of the Russian Formalists are an important, yet often overlooked context in which Krivulin's verse should be situated. The effectiveness of such an approach was demonstrated by Liudmila Zubova in her “Teoria i praktika svobodnogo stikha Viktora Krivulina.”<sup>170</sup> Analyzing Krivulin's poem “свободный стих возникает с развитием личного транспорта” (“Free verse emerges with the development of private transportation,” 1998), she argues that the terms of formal poetic analysis, like Tynyanov's famous definition “теснота стихового ряда” (the density of the poetic line),<sup>171</sup> which differentiates free verse from prose, are aestheticized in Krivulin's lyrics. They are not regarded as oppositional to the poetry itself, but coterminous with it. The distance between the critic and poet is narrowing, Zubova maintains. Syllabo-tonic versification is nostalgically intoned. Free verse, understood as the symbol of Western-born freedoms and civil rights, is no more at home in Russia than those

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Lyudmila Zubova, “Teoria i praktika svobodnogo stikha Viktora Krivulina.” In *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 6, 2001, 243-248.

<sup>171</sup> See Yurii Tynianov, *Problema stikhotvornogo iazyka. Stat'i*, Moscow, 1965.

freedoms or rights probably are. "Теснота стихотворного ряда в трамвае конечно же требует рифмы" [The density of the poetic line in the tram car certainly warrants a rhyme]—and yet Krivulin's poem is totally unrhymed: the nostalgic quality of the Formalist literary definitions implicitly indicate the import they had in the Golden Age of the underground, in the 1970s.

There are many other contexts in which Krivulin's poetry could and should be situated: Krivulin and the "Petersburg" context, elucidated in Stephanie Sandler's essay, or Krivulin and the Leningrad school of religious poetry, of which he had been considered a part—at least originally. However, what interests me here is Krivulin's relation to the major figures of Russian post-elegiac poetry, Tiutchev and Boratynsky. Both were particular favorites of Krivulin—Boratynsky, with his persistent alienation from the literary and intellectual circles during all his mature years, and Tiutchev, the first if not the only completely *amateur* poet in Russian literature, could perhaps flatter the imagination of an underground poet who was forced into amateurism and alienation from "official culture" by political circumstances. The impact of both Tiutchev and Boratynsky on the formation of the self-awareness of the underground could become the subject of a separate essay. Here I would like to draw attention to just one particular instance of this influence—Krivulin's early poem "Вопрос к Тютчеву" [A Question for Tiutchev], and the rather queer circumstances of its production.

On page seven of Viktor Krivulin's autobiographical *Okhota na mamonta* we read:

Условно говоря, я "семидесятник", хотя бы потому, что на моем внутреннем календаре отмечена ярко-красным одна дата - 5 часов утра 24 июля 1970 года. Нет, в ту ночь я не писал стихов. Я читал Боратынского и дочитался до того, что перестал слышать, где его голос, а где мой. Я потерял свой голос и ощутил невероятную свободу, причем вовсе не трагическую, вымученную свободу

экзистенциалистов, а легкую, воздушную свободу, словно спала какая-то тяжесть с души. Вдруг не стало времени. Умерло время, в котором я, казалось, был обречен жить до смерти, утешаясь стоической истиной, что 'времена не выбирают, в них живут и умирают'. Вот оно только что лежало передо мной на письменной столе, нормальное, точное, сносно устроенное, а осталось кучка пепла. И тотчас за окном, в конце Большого проспекта, вылезло из-за дома Белогруда огромное солнце. Очень большое, неправдоподобное<sup>172</sup>.

[I am, so to speak, a man of the 1970s, because on my internal calendar there is one highlighted date: 5 o'clock in the morning, 24 June 1970. I was not writing verse then—I was reading Boratynsky and got to a point when I no longer could tell his voice from my own. I lost my voice and experienced incredible freedom, not tragic, tortured freedom of existentialists, but light, airy freedom; I felt like some burden was lifted from my soul. Time was no more. The time (consoled by the stoic truth that “we do not choose the time in which we live, we live and die in it”) in which I was doomed to live until my death, died. It had just been in front of me, on my desk. It was normal, precise, neatly organized time, and now it was a pile of ash. And right then the giant sun looked out of the *Belogrud* house at the end of the Bol'shoi prospect. It was very big, unrealistically big.]

This would be just another specimen of quite undistinguished, recognizably romantic self-fashioning but for one queer fact. The poem, the creation of which is here implicitly described (and which opens the volume from which the quotation is taken, preceding the above by just one page), is titled "Вопрос к Тютчеву." But Krivulin is talking about Boratynsky, not Tiutchev. And yet it couldn't be a different poem: the date of the poem and the date in the autobiography are identical: 5am, July 24th, 1970. It is unlikely that he made a mistake and confused Boratynsky with Tiutchev in the autobiography. Are we supposed to attribute this discrepancy to the romantic unreliability of an underground poet? While we may assume that

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<sup>172</sup> Viktor Krivulin, *Okhota na mamonta*. St. Petersburg: Blitz, 1998, 7.

Krivulin was reading Boratynsky, and then wrote a poem-question for Tiutchev, such an explanation does not seem very compelling.<sup>173</sup>

This riddle, though it has been noticed by scholars of contemporary poetry<sup>174</sup> as well as by Krivulin's friends from the underground, has yet to be disentangled. It is rather puzzling that such an important poem (Krivulin claimed to have destroyed all his earlier texts after completing this poem; later, when he was running for Parliament, Krivulin used the poem in lieu of a political program) would contain an obvious contradiction. I will now sketch a brief close reading of this important poem, and then show how it comments on the idiosyncratic social and economic situation of the literary underground.

Krivulin's poem deals with the question of time. Effectively linking the "calendar" with "ice" by alliteration ("kaLenDAr"" - "L'DA") in line 2, the poem suggests the materiality of time, which flows like ice — something that makes sense for the inhabitants of Petersburg, where the ice from Lake Ladoga floats to the Baltic annually, and approximately at the same time (early May). This metaphor has a prehistory in Mandelshtam's 1937 poem, "Слышу, слышу ранний лед"<sup>175</sup> [I hear, I hear the early ice], which likewise characterizes the ice temporally, as "early." Being material, time obeys the rules of the Soviet calendar, which directs it to the sea. The

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<sup>173</sup> In fact, the very writing of this poem at 5am on the 24th of July, 1970 was doubted by the author of the Krivulin obituary, Mikhail Sheinker. He writes: "Прочтя это, я спросил Виктора: "В Ленинграде, 24 июля, в пять часов утра, а если в календарь заглянуть — не поздно ли?" — на что он, наклонив голову слегка набок и сощулив правый глаз, не весь, но только уголок, ответил: "Но ведь из-за дома вылезло — значит, позже — точно, в пять. [Having read this, I asked Viktor, "In Leningrad, 24 July, at five in the morning, and what if we look at the calendar—isn't it too late? And he, tilting his head and squinting his right eye, not the whole eye, just the corner of it, answered: "But it crawled out of the house, which means it was later, exactly at five]. Mikhail Sheinker, "...Grivastaia krivaia...Viktora Krivulina," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 4, 2001, 230.

<sup>174</sup> It was discussed, without any definite conclusion, at the conference on Krivulin held at Harvard in August 2004.

<sup>175</sup> Osip Mandel'shtam, *Stikhotvoreniia*, ed. S. V. Vasilenko & I. L. Freidin, Moscow: Respublika, 1992, 150.

absurdity of such a "sovietization" of a natural phenomenon had some precedents in official Soviet propaganda, according to which sunrise and wind followed Party directives and specifically Lenin's will. Here, time is enslaved by the Soviets by means of a "Soviet calendar"; the question is: into what sea does it go?

Obviously, it goes to the Baltic Sea. But the temporality of ice implies that there must be another, less obvious answer, an answer that may be obtained only from Tiutchev. "V kakoe more" has some strong colloquial connotations; if understood non-literally: it would mean something like "what lies ahead?" "what does the future holds?" or "what will follow?" The first two lines then appear to have a very carefully crafted structure: every word in them has both a geographical and temporal meaning. Poetry brings time and space together and, not incidentally, a poet is invited to resolve the riddle: "Я Тютчева спрошу" [I will ask Tiutchev]. As if following Einstein's logic, time and space become a unity which has a definite political hue: the Soviet regime. The Soviet space-time, where is it going?

Wherever it goes, it does so with sadness. Why is time not weeping with crystal tears, being God's creature (lines 3-4)—yet being, as it were, enslaved by the Soviets? Lines 5-7 present us with another absurd question, which answers itself even before being fully asked ("почему – от страха и стыда," "Why? —from terror and disgrace"). Asking what is answered in the question itself is indicative of some vicious circle in reasoning. As if unsatisfied with the answer, the poem then asks the question about water and icons: "Почему <...> темнеет большеглазая вода, тускнеют очи на иконе" [Why does the large-eyed water dim and fade, the icon's orbs grow vague]. But we already know that it is from "terror and disgrace!" Importantly, "большеглазая вода" contains "больше" [more], which in the Soviet context,

present from the beginning, may be an allusion to Bolshevism. Like time and space, water becomes "bolshevized" and is terrified by it, and disgraced by it. Like the first question ("into what sea), the third ("why do the icon's orbs grow vague") answers itself in the very process of asking, and is likewise addressed to Tiutchev ("и почему," "and why"—it is a parallel construction).

The second stanza opens not with a question, but with mourning. Tiutchev is then asked again, explicitly, in lines 12-14, "Каким сказать небесным языком об умирающей минуты" [in what heavenly language can I speak of the dying minute?]. Just as before, the question answers itself: "небесным языком" [heavenly language] would be then the answer, but it is given before the question is even finished. Now, it is also becoming clearer why the poem repeatedly refers to Tiutchev: the question now is asked "myslenno, taikom", in a secretive manner, alluding to Tiutchev's "Silentium" (1830s).<sup>176</sup>

The dying minute anticipates time's funeral: "мы время отпоем, и высохшее тельце накроем бережно нежнейшей пеленой" [We sing the burial of time, and the dried-out little body we cover carefully with softest swaddling]. Yet it is not just time—the poem has prepared us to think of time ideologically. It was the Soviet calendar that drove the ice in the opening lines of the poem. Are we to assume that it is "Soviet" time that is being mourned here? The return is impossible, but also—the escape: "не надейся, что бред веков и тусклый плен минут тебя минует - видишь ли, вернут добро исконному владельцу" [Don't hope that the madness of

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<sup>176</sup> The very title of the poem, "Вопрос к Тютчеву" may be evocative of the famous article by Yurii Tynianov, "Vopros o Tiutcheve" (Yurii Tynianov, "Vopros o Tiutcheve," in Iurii Tynianov, *Literaturnyi fakt*, Moscow, 1993). In this article, Tynianov speaks about Tiutchev's ties with the eighteenth century, and the pre-elegiac poetic tradition.

centuries and the dull spell of minutes will pass you by—believe it or not, those goods will be returned to their long-patient owner].

Boris Ivanov speculates that the poem must have been written shortly after the death of Leonid Aronzon, and therefore allusively refers to his death in these lines.<sup>177</sup> He also insists that this poem is a poem of beginning, of “jump-starting” the cultural project of the 1970s. Yet everything we have seen so far has been tinted with the inexplicable sadness of a presumed parting with something dear. How so?

Indeed, out of six questions posed, three may be read as answering themselves: “в какое море?” [into what sea?], “почему от страха и стыда темнеет большеглазая вода” [why from terror and disgrace does the large-eyed water dim and fade?], and “каким сказать небесным языком об умирающей минуты?” [in what heavenly language can I speak of the dying minute?].

The answer to the first question (the Baltic Sea) is obvious, yet the mention of the “Soviet calendar,” which is conjoined via alliteration with the natural flow of ice down the Neva in the spring, makes such a direct geographical answer rather suspicious. The next two questions

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<sup>177</sup> "У "Вопроса к Тютчеву" - две авторских датировки. В новых публикациях стихи помечены 24 июля 1970 года. В сборнике "Стихотворения", составленном автором и опубликованном в качестве литературного приложения к самиздатскому журналу "Часы" в 1979 году, под "Вопросом Тютчеву" указан в качестве даты ноябрь, вскоре после гибели Аронзона. Полагаю, что верная дата - именно ноябрь. Почему это важно знать? Мне кажется, в стихах запечатлелись отголоски поминок по Аронзону, реакция на его смерть. Именно в этих обстоятельствах Кривулин пишет свое первое программное стихотворение, наметившее контуры "культурного проекта" неподцензурного литературного поколения 70-х." [There are two dates given by the author for "A Question to Tiutchev." In newer publications, the poem is marked July 24, 1970. In the collection "Poems," compiled by the author and published as supplement to the journal *Chasy*, the poem is dated November of the same year, which means it was written soon after Aronzon's death. I believe the correct date is November. Why is it important? I think that in this poem there are traces of commemoration of Aronzon; this poem is a reaction to Aronzon's death. In these circumstances Krivulin writes his first key poem which delineated the outlines of the cultural project of literary underground of the 1970s]. Boris Ivanov, "Khronika sovremennoi literatury. Viktor Krivulin – poet rossiiskogo renessansa. 1944-2001," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 4, 2004, 272.



encode the answer in a grammatically incorrect position. Instead of being located in a separate clause, independent of the main sentence, it is an indirect causal modifier of the verb, which is asking the question: "what heavenly language can I speak?"—well, naturally, heavenly! Or, "why from terror and disgrace the large-eyed water dims and fades?"—well, from "terror and disgrace!"

This series of persistent conflations (questions are conflated with answers, "the soviet calendar" is conflated with the ice on the Neva, and, lastly, the "large-eyed water" is both "large-eyed" but also "Soviet," "BOLSHevik"; and even the switch between the first and second persons in the second stanza—"ТЫ ВЗГЛЯД ОСЛЕПШЕГО ОТ СЛЕЗ" ("you are the gaze blinded by tears")—bespeaks the kind of predicament that the poem finds itself in. Since Soviet reality penetrates the very fabric of words and things and calendars, the possibility of a "heavenly language," for preserving words, space, or time unaffected by official ideology becomes impossible. It is this impossibility which is effectively dramatized, realized in the poem. The realization of this impossibility is the turning point in the plot of the poem. It brings about the death of time (supposedly, "Soviet" time, but we are not sure), but also the possibility of a new beginning.

I argue that what Krivulin metaphorically refers to in the first part of "Вопрос к Тютчеву" is the radically insufficient degree of autonomy from the cultural field, and his (initially—failed) attempts to claim a higher degree of independence. As he searches for sources or models of independence, he is forced to admit that none of them actually work, since the very language of poetry is being forcibly taken away from him. He is overcome with despair: "Пред миром неживым в растерянности, в смуте, в духовном омуте, как рыбы безголос, Ты -

взгляд ослепшего от слез” [At a loss before the unliving world, ill at ease, in a spiritual maelstrom, like a fish voiceless, you are the gaze blinded by tears].

Yet an unexpected solution is suddenly found in the third stanza, at the funeral of “time.” The poet realizes that there is no other way but to part with everything that is dear, since everything is essentially contaminated, in the manner of the first two stanzas of the poem. Thus, he goes on to formulate a manifesto or, better to say, the *sine qua non* condition of the underground:

Родства к истории родной  
Не отрекайся, милый, не надейся,  
Что бред веков и тусклый плен минут  
Тебя минует - видишь ли, вернут  
Добро исконному владельцу.

[your relation to our own dear history -  
don't deny it, dearest, and don't hope  
that the madness of centuries and the dull spell of minutes  
will pass you by - believe it or not, those goods  
will be returned to their long-patient owner.]

This is the impossibility of escaping from history. But the need to claim a much higher degree of independence from the language, culture, or the literary field of official Soviet culture that is forcing Krivulin to make this pronouncement is quite urgent as well. Remembering Bourdieu and his discussion of the varying degree of autonomy within the literary field, I can say that this poem dreams of such a high degree of independence from the literary field that it leads to a complete breakaway from it (while the actual literary practices of the underground literature realized the dream). This poem is a metaphor for the very existence of underground culture. It is

a ritual of breaking free from the tenets of the field of Soviet literature, and a manual of how to do that—hence its role and significance for Krivulin, but also for the underground culture in general.

Overall, I argue that the most important context in which this poem should be situated is that of the economic and social configurations of the underground literature of the 1960s-80s. What this poem metaphorically enacts actually happened during that time in the underground. Underground literature did become a fully autonomous, independent literary field with its own set of literary institutions, such as thick journals (like *Tridsat' sem* [Thirty-Seven], named after the apartment number in which Krivulin lived with his first wife Tatiana Goricheva, *Chasy* [Hours], *Obvodnyi kanal* [Obvodnyi Canal], after one of the canals in St. Petersburg], *Mitin zhurnal* [Mitia's Journal], published by Dmitri [Mitia] Volchek), conferences, literary clubs (*Klub 81* [Club of the 1981] was one of the key venues for underground literature), literary awards (the Andrei Bely Prize was considered the most authoritative among the authors of the underground), study groups, and even fledgling censorship: Boris Ivanov, the editor of *Chasy* was notorious for turning down some of the submissions on the basis of their frivolous treatment of religious issues.<sup>178</sup>

Returning to the question of the poem's title, and the uncertainty caused by Krivulin's own admission that he had been reading Boratynsky before he composed a poem to Tiutchev, I would venture to say that such inaccuracy is purposefully misleading. This poem is a

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<sup>178</sup> Mikhail Sheinker, private interview, May 2013. For a comprehensive survey of the literary institutions of the Leningrad underground, see Boris Ivanov, ed., *Istoria leningradskoi nepodtsenzurnoi literatury*, St. Petersburg: Dean, 2000.

dramatization of the underground condition, and an invitation to claim the highest possible degree of autonomy in the field of cultural production.

## Conclusion

This dissertation situates the discussion of Russian lyric poetry of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the context of social and economic approaches to literature. Using Pierre Bourdieu's concept of literary field as my primary research tool, I explore the social and economic inventory of verse. The starting point of my inquiry is the assumption that lyric poetry has been persistently misread—it was denied the ability to speak about relevant social and economic issues of the day, and instead expected to engage only “universal,” “timeless,” “eternal” subjects. My dissertation argues for a new practical mode of reading poetry, a mode of reading which goes against the grain of both the existing scholarship on poetry and also the self-imposed vow of being “somewhat stupid,” of refusing or being unable to converse about and investigate social, economic, and political realia.

In particular, my research follows the interaction between Russian poetry and the growing importance of the literary market in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I begin with the analysis of the elegiac response to the emergent literary market in the early nineteenth century, and I explore various ways in which the Russian elegiac poets responded to the growing presence of literary market. Then, I move to two counter-examples to the general trend of marginalization of poetic discourse on the literary market. I look at the literary trajectories of Nikolai Nekrasov and Igor Severianin, who attempted to make their poetic production competitive on the literary market, and I show how they adapt their poetics to the perceived demands of the literary market.

In my third chapter I survey the fully-fledged literary market of pre-1917 Russia. I analyze the poetry of Osip Mandel'shtam. I argue that his poetic stance, while being quite typical for a modernist poet, nonetheless allowed him to provide a subtle commentary on the uncertainties and ambiguities of the modernist poet whose audience is often limited to other producers of verse. I also read later Mandel'shtam's poetry, regarding it as a precursor and an important model for the underground literature of the 1960s-1980s, which is the subject of my last chapter.

As my dissertation demonstrates, one can and should read poetry with an eye for uncovering the economic and social dynamics of poetic discourse. This work is a testimony to the success of such an approach, but it certainly does not exhaust the possibilities of this method.

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